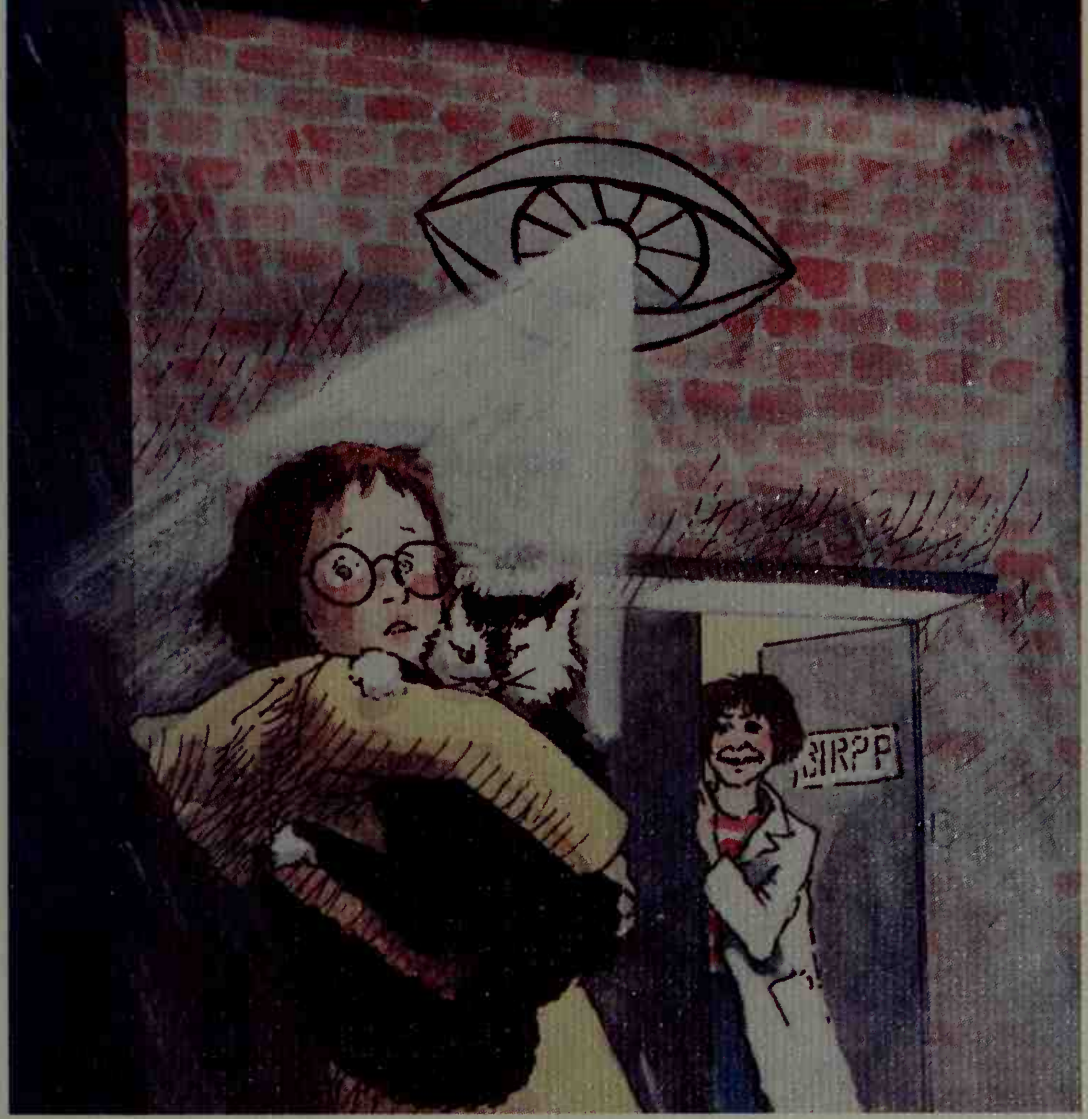
THE Ghastly Glasses

by BEATRICE GORMLEY

illustrated by Emily Arnold McCully



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THE Ghastly Glasses

THE Ghastly Glasses

THE GHASTLY GLASSES

Also by Beatrice Gormley

Fifth Grade Magic
Mail-Order Wings
Best Friend Insurance

THE Ghastly Glasses

by BEATRICE GORMLEY

illustrated by Emily Arnold McCully

E. P. DUTTON • NEW YORK

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in memory of my grandmother, Clara Y. Fisher

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1

The Staring Eye

The huge eye stared at them through the rainy dusk. Nearsighted though she was, Andrea was the one who caught sight of it. Aunt Bets was looking the other way, turning the car into a small shopping center. "The optician your mama mentioned should be in here, according to her directions, although I don't—"

"Could that be it, across the road?" Andrea pointed at the dark brick building squatting by itself on the other side of the street. The single eye gazed down from what would be the building's forehead, if buildings had faces.

Wheeling the car around again, Aunt Bets leaned forward to peer past the windshield wipers at the building. "Oh, I see. I thought your mama told me the place to get your glasses was *in* the shopping center, but I guess she meant the shopping center was a landmark." Looking back over her shoulder, she studied the row of shops:

a pizza parlor, a drugstore, a Laundromat, a shoe store. "There's certainly no optician here."

"As a matter of fact," said Andrea, "I don't think we went exactly the way Mother said to." That was an understatement. She was sure that Aunt Bets had taken several wrong turns. Andrea had tried to tell her, but Aunt Bets didn't listen.

Smiling a little, Aunt Bets steered the car back toward the exit. The tires swished through puddles. "No, I don't necessarily need to follow directions in order to find my way. You see, in my business, you have to develop a good sense of direction. Why, if I went out to show a client a house and couldn't find that house, what kind of an impression would that make?" Her purple fingernail polish gleamed as she spun the steering wheel.

It wasn't quite dark, but the fog lights and red taillights of passing cars shone wetly on the pavement. While Aunt Bets parked her car in front of the building, Andrea squinted through the windshield at the big eye, trying to figure out what made it seem so strange. It was black and white, a regular eye with an eyelid and an iris and a pupil in the center. . . .

"It's not a very appealing sign, is it?" remarked Aunt Bets. "Someone who wants to attract customers ought to have an inviting kind of sign, but there's something almost ghastly about that eye."

It was the pupil. Real pupils were black, but this one was white, because a beam of light was shining from it. Just the opposite of a real eye, thought Andrea.

"I hope they'll have a good selection of frames," said Aunt Bets, turning off the engine. "We want to choose

the ones that are just right for your sweet heart-shaped face."

Andrea didn't say anything, but she felt a sour expression creeping over her sweet heart-shaped face. It was bad enough to have to get glasses, without Aunt Bets trying to tell her what kind of frames to choose.

"Yes, glasses have actually become fashion accessories," Aunt Bets went on. "Just lock the door on your side, will you, dear?" In her shimmery silver raincoat, Aunt Bets looked like an astronaut easing out of a space capsule. She snapped open her umbrella—silver, to match the raincoat.

Pulling the hood of her yellow slicker over her head, Andrea trotted up the path to the double doors. Under the shelter of the overhang she hesitated, frowning. *Was* this the optician's? There were letters on the right-hand door: BIRPP. Could that be the optician's name?

Striding up behind Andrea, Aunt Bets grasped a door handle and pulled—but the door only rattled against the lock. "Why, they can't be closed. It isn't any later than four o'clock." She poked the doorbell with the point of her umbrella.

"Aunt Bets," said Andrea, "maybe this isn't an optician, after all. I think I made a mistake."

Aunt Bets laughed tolerantly, her purple earrings swinging like miniature wrecking balls as she turned toward Andrea. "Of course it's an optician. Why else would they have a great big eye on the building?" Twirling her umbrella, she rapped the handle sharply on the door.

Stepping back from the overhang, Andrea took an-

other look at the eye. Its pupil shone down on the car, highlighting the lines of rain.

There was a click from inside. Someone was unlocking the door. Andrea jumped back to the doorway, behind Aunt Bets.

"You were able to come, after all!" A woman in a white lab coat, with big eyes and a long neck like a giraffe, greeted Aunt Bets. "I am Valerie Weirse." She moved aside to let Aunt Bets in. "After I show you how much progress I've made, and what I could accomplish with more funds, I know you'll agree that I deserve the grant money."

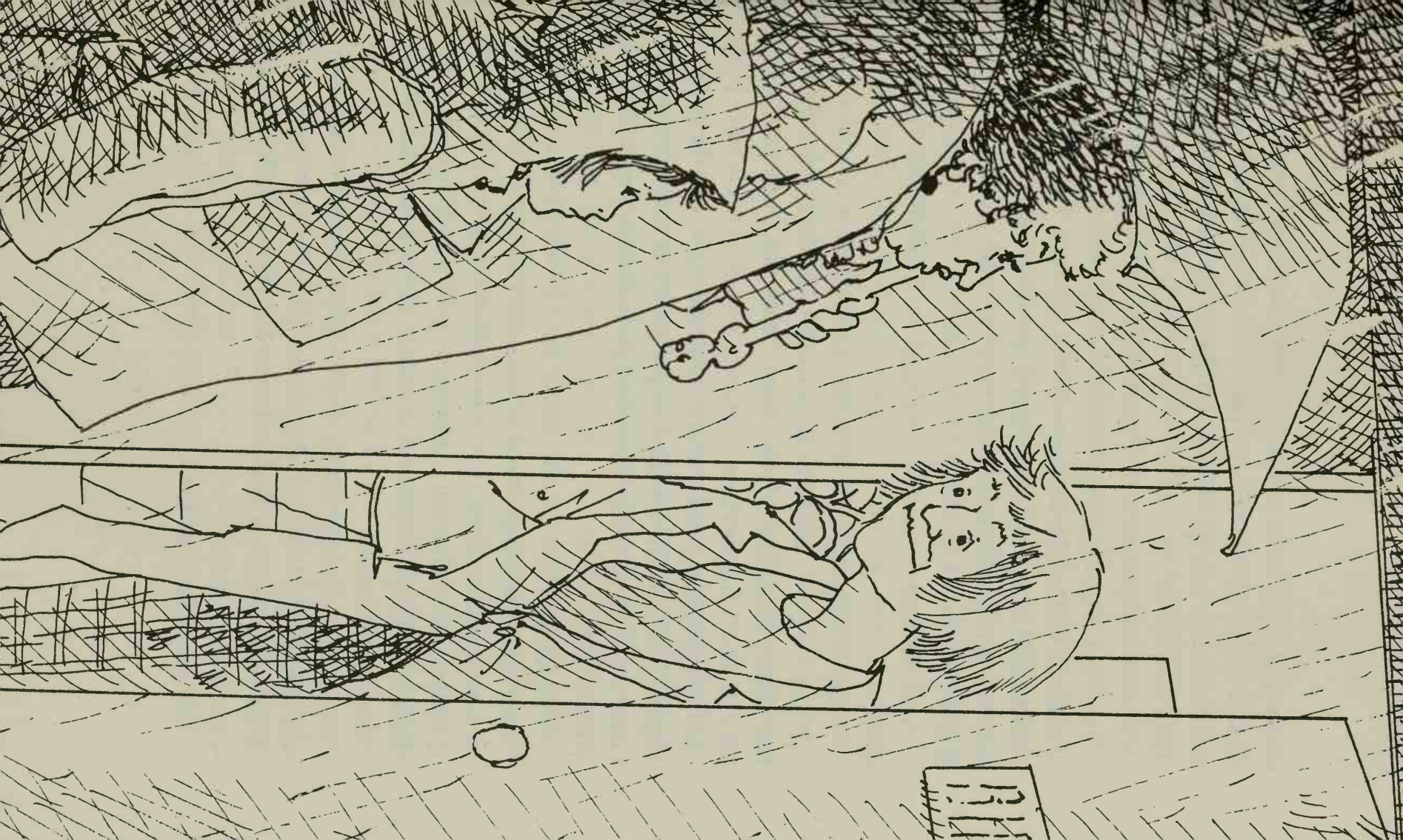
Beyond the woman, Andrea glimpsed a small room with a desk and a filing cabinet and a feeble-looking rubber plant. A half-open door next to the desk led to another room.

Aunt Bets stepped inside hesitantly—not the way Aunt Bets usually stepped, thought Andrea. "Actually, we came to—"

"You see," the other woman went on, gazing impressively into Aunt Bets's face, "as I explained in my letter, the possibilities for helping people through my discovery are limitless. I've completed the basic research, so all that remains to be done is the experimental development."

Pausing for breath, Valerie Weirse seemed to notice Andrea for the first time. She pulled back, blinking her large eyes from one to the other of them. In a tone of dismay, she asked, "Who is this?"

"This is my grandniece Andrea." Aunt Bets snapped her silvery umbrella shut, showering Valerie Weirse with



drops, and pulled a piece of paper from her purse. "We would like to look at your glasses frames, if you please; here is the prescription for Andrea's glasses. Simple myopia, I believe."

"You *aren't* from the Psychic Research Foundation." The other woman stretched her long neck until she was almost as tall as Aunt Bets. "You thought I was an—an optician?" She said the word as if it was a terrible insult. "Didn't you see the sign on the door? This is BIRPP!"

Andrea had to smother a giggle at Aunt Bets's expression.

"*Burp?*" asked Aunt Bets distastefully.

"Yes." The lab-coated woman folded her arms, her face flushing as if Aunt Bets had tricked her. "*B-I-R-P-P:* Borderline Institute for Research into Psychic Phenomena. My work here should not be interrupted. It is of the utmost importance. You see, my discovery will eventually benefit even ordinary people like yourself."

Tilting her head back, Aunt Bets lowered her eyelids. "I see that there has been a misunderstanding—the kind of misunderstanding that is bound to happen, I'm afraid, if firms that are not opticians' *will* put large eyes on their buildings." She laid a hand on Andrea's shoulder. "Come, Andrea."

A sudden change came over Valerie Weirse's face, and she leaped in front of the door. She was staring at Andrea now. Andrea noticed that the woman's large eyes were bloodshot.

"Wait. Something about this girl." Ms. Weirse's tone

was low and intense, and her eyes seemed to trace an outline around Andrea's shape. "The aura is vibrating, hinting at potential." Valerie Weirse bent over Andrea, pushing back the hood of her slicker to study her face more closely. "Have you ever had an experience that was . . . very much out of the ordinary?"

Andrea felt a tingle run down her neck. Did it show? How could this woman know about the time Andrea had worn wings and flown like a bird? That adventure seemed so long ago—over a year, now. Andrea didn't think about it much anymore.

But with this strange woman's eyes on her, Andrea could almost feel again the feathery wings folded against her shoulder blades, the tug of birdlike muscles in her back and chest, the wild freedom of soaring through the sky.

Aunt Bets's voice brought Andrea back to earth. "Since you asked," her great-aunt was saying brightly, "Andrea *has* had some unusual opportunities for a girl her age. Last spring, for instance, when she came to my house for a visit, we took the train into New York City and had all kinds of wonderful experiences: a Broadway show, the Museum of Modern Art—"

"And you want to get *glasses*." Ignoring Aunt Bets, Ms. Weirse was gazing at Andrea with her hands clasped, as if she couldn't believe her luck.

"Yes," said Aunt Bets, "but since we can't get them here, we won't hold you up any longer, Miss Worse." She motioned with her umbrella, as if to nudge the other woman out of their way.

"Oh, but—" Valerie Weirse gave a high-pitched laugh.

"How silly of me. Of course, this is primarily a research facility, but I could make an exception—I would be happy to fit *this* girl with glasses. I'll go back in the laboratory and get them." She scurried toward the door at the back of the room.

"But—" Aunt Bets waved the piece of paper after her. "Don't you need the prescription?"

"Oh—oh, yes, of course," said Valerie Weirse breathlessly, stuffing the prescription into her pocket without looking at it. She backed through the door, still staring at Andrea.

Andrea's spine tingled. The researcher had thought Aunt Bets was from the Psychic Research Foundation. *Psychic* had to do with things like reading people's minds, and making tables float through the air, and telling fortunes, didn't it?

Andrea felt excited, then frightened. She remembered all the trouble she had gotten into last year with the wings. Maybe the smartest thing would be to leave, right now.

"Aunt Bets," said Andrea slowly, "I think we should try another optician."

"Maybe so." Aunt Bets was strolling around the room, swinging her folded umbrella and studying the framed diplomas on the walls. "Hm, a master's degree in parapsychology. And this certificate with an eye on it—it seems to be in some Slavic language—I suppose that's for optics. Anyway, as I was saying, it doesn't matter which optician you go to, as long as they can fill the prescription. *I* just wish they had a selection of frames to choose from here." She looked around the small room,

as if she might have missed a rack of glasses frames. "I'm not sure about this optician's sense of style—I'm afraid she cuts her own hair. Well, we'll just see if we like what Miss Worse shows us."

Andrea sat up straight, lifting her chin. We'll see if *I* like it, you mean, she thought. They're *my* glasses, and I'm the one who has to wear them. Aunt Bets doesn't seem to realize that I'm old enough to make my own decisions.

"Here!" Valerie Weirse tiptoed out of the laboratory, cradling a pair of dark-framed glasses in both hands. "Here they are."

Aunt Bets narrowed her eyes at the glasses, then shook her head. "No. I'm sorry, but those frames would be too severe for Andrea's delicate features. Is this all you have in stock?"

Paying no attention, the researcher held out the glasses to Andrea and slipped the earpieces over her ears. "I think you'll find that these glasses will allow you to . . . *focus* on things as you've never done before. Although you have a little natural talent, I can see that. If *I* had your potential—!" Ms. Weirse sighed. "But my day will come. How do they feel?"

"All right, I guess." Andrea was relieved, but disappointed. The glasses seemed to be perfectly ordinary glasses for a nearsighted person. What was Ms. Weirse so excited about? Andrea gazed around the room, noticing the cobwebs in the corners and the dead leaves under the plant by the door. "I can see better. But I wish I could see how I look in them."

"Here you go, darling. Use the mirror in my com-

pact," offered Aunt Bets. "I think you'll see what I mean—they give you a rather stern, critical look."

Looking into the powder-flecked mirror, Andrea examined her own face with the dark-framed glasses. They made her look older, she thought, and smarter. Like someone in charge. "I like them."

"And you will like the improvements that are possible with them," said Valerie Weirse earnestly.

Andrea wondered what she meant by "improvements"—better grades? Aunt Bets cleared her throat loudly. "Well, now, Andrea dear, you shouldn't take the first pair you try on. I don't think your mama and papa would be pleased with me if they came back from their trip and found that I let you—"

"This girl may keep the glasses for a few days to see how they *work*—how she likes them," the researcher interrupted. "Then I will contact her to see if she is adjusting—if she is making full *use* of them. Your address?"

Again a shiver passed through Andrea. What did the researcher mean—or did she mean anything? Andrea stood up, stumbled, and grabbed at the edge of the desk. "Hey! What's wrong? The floor looks too far away."

Aunt Bets laughed indulgently. "That's normal, darling. You have to get used to new glasses. In a few days, it'll seem as if you'd always worn them. Although we *do* want to think a little more about those frames, Miss Worse. The Reve address is 19 Maple Avenue, in Rushfield, and the phone number is listed. You may send the bill to Philip Reve. Good-bye, now." Just outside the door,

she put up her umbrella with a snap, once more showering drops over the other woman.

In the parking lot, as Aunt Bets started the car, Andrea craned her neck to look up at the big eye again. The beam of light from the pupil shone down into the car, as if it were focused right on her.

2

Watch Out for Andrea!

The next morning, Andrea climbed the front steps of the school with her head bent, placing her feet carefully. She still hadn't gotten used to the ground seeming so far away.

"You're looking awfully bright-eyed and pretty today, Andrea!" Mr. Hinkle, the principal, beamed at her from the top of the steps. "Those must be new glasses."

"Mm-hm." Andrea wished he wouldn't talk in such a loud voice. She had hoped to slip into the building quietly.

But Mr. Hinkle went on, tucking in his chin as he smiled his kindly smile. "I'll bet you can see twice as much as you could before. No stopping you now, huh? Watch out for Andrea!"

"Yes, I can see better," said Andrea coolly. She paused on the top step, looking at him. It was true; in the No-

vember morning sunlight, everything about Mr. Hinkle was very clear, as if he were an insect under a microscope. She noticed for the first time a few white strands in his neatly parted sandy hair. The yellow dots on his tie, she saw now, were little smiley faces. A metal filling flashed from one of his back teeth.

Then Mr. Hinkle's smile vanished as his glance shifted from Andrea to the sidewalk below. Turning, Andrea saw Scott LeClerq, a boy in her class, grab a little boy's lunchbox. "Whoo-ee, a Star Wars lunchbox!" Scott held it up in the air. "I want my mommy to buy me one just like it."

His round cheeks turning red, the little boy jumped at the lunchbox, far out of his reach. Two of Scott's buddies laughed.

"Scott, pick on someone your own size!" Mr. Hinkle hurried down the steps.

Andrea was glad to see Scott get caught. Now Mr. Hinkle would give him a long lecture about how the school was like a family and the older kids should act like big brothers and sisters to the younger ones. Scott deserved a lecture—not that it would really change him, of course.

Slipping through the front door of the school, Andrea wondered why Mr. Hinkle had to make personal remarks, like about her glasses. He wasn't her father or her uncle, after all. Of course a lot of kids *liked* Mr. Hinkle to act fatherly. They liked his kindly smile and his personal remarks. Andrea hadn't minded Mr. Hinkle's ways, either, until this fall. Maybe he had gotten worse.

Pushing open the door to her classroom, Andrea saw

Lauren hanging up her jacket in the coat closet. And how clearly Andrea could see her! Even from several feet away, Andrea could make out the purple letters *Lauren* on her pink hair ribbon.

Andrea hung her jacket next to Lauren's. "Guess who's getting a bad-boy lecture from Mr. Hinkle—Scott."

"Good." Lauren smiled over her shoulder. "I'll never forgive him for the time he put the rest of his Fudgsicle on my—" Turning all the way around, Lauren stared at Andrea's face. "Andy! You got glasses." Her smile faded into an uneasy expression. "How come you got black ones?"

Andrea felt hurt. "What's the matter with black? I like them."

"They're all right," said Lauren quickly. "They make you look a little . . . bossy, that's all."

Before Andrea could answer, another girl paused in front of the closet, swinging her green jacket and staring at Andrea. "Andrea got glasses!"

Julie Dodd, of course. Andrea stalked off toward her desk, ignoring the curious looks of the boys and girls who had heard Julie.

But Julie went on, to Lauren and whoever else was listening. "My mother says if I ever have to wear glasses, I can get contact lenses, so I don't have to look funny."

Andrea's jaw clenched. "That's good, because you look funny enough as it is." She was pleased to hear a ripple of giggles.

At the front of the room, Mrs. Seberg rapped on her desk with a ruler. "I thought I heard the tardy bell ring.

That means everyone in their seats and *quiet*." She gave Andrea and Julie meaningful looks.

But as Andrea slid into her seat, she heard Julie whisper to Lauren, "Her parents probably couldn't afford contact lenses."

Andrea felt her cheeks burn. Pulling the glasses from her face, she shoved them into the back of her desk. She rubbed the bridge of her nose and the tops of her ears, where the frames had rested. After all, she didn't have to wear the glasses every minute. She had gotten along pretty well until now without them. If she needed to read the blackboard, she could just pop them back on.

Later that afternoon, Andrea knelt on the braided rug in the family room, dragging the cord from her sweatshirt hood in front of Samuel Tail. Samuel Tail was Aunt Bets's cat. Most of his long, silky fur was black, but his paws, which he spent a lot of time licking, were white, and so was his chest. And his face was white with an inkblot of black running down one side of his nose, giving him a wild look.

Samuel Tail didn't act wild, though. Even when Andrea dragged the cord right over his paws, he only opened one glassy green eye to see who was bothering him, then shut it again.

What good was a cat who wouldn't play? thought Andrea. He just lay there like a fur pillow, too big and fat to have any fun. Eating and sleeping and licking his paws was all he had done since he stepped out of his cat carrier the day before yesterday.

"Walk-walk-walk, Samuel Tail!" Aunt Bets appeared

in the doorway, her silvery raincoat shimmering. "First a brisk walk, and then—*Kitty Salmon.*"

Instantly the fur pillow uncurled and jumped to his feet, his eyes wide and his pink mouth opening in a high-pitched mew. Andrea was amazed. "Did he know what you said?"

"Sometimes I think he does." Aunt Bets gazed fondly at her cat. "He's unusually intelligent, like his namesake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge." Snapping the last snap on her raincoat, she slipped a little harness over the cat's head. "Why don't you come for a walk with us, Andrea dear? If you exercise just before dinner, it makes everything taste extra good."

Andrea didn't think she needed to work up an appetite, but she was curious to see how Samuel Tail behaved on a leash. "All right. I'll get my jacket."

"And put your glasses on, won't you." Aunt Bets followed her into the hall, Samuel Tail padding at her side. "I hope you aren't avoiding them because of those severe dark frames. They don't look so bad, and of course you can get them changed. The important thing is to see what's going on in the world."

Andrea hadn't planned to wear her glasses, but to stop Aunt Bets from talking about them, she fished them out of her jacket pocket and put them on.

"I wonder why your mama stopped arranging your hair in two tails?" mused Aunt Bets as she plucked her umbrella from the rack by the kitchen door. She paused with her hand on the doorknob, studying Andrea's face. "That was such a fetching style for your heart-shaped—"

"Aunt Bets, nobody in the fifth grade wears their hair in ponytails." Andrea was tempted to remind her great-aunt how fetching *her* hair had looked last year, dyed reddish blonde, but it was better just to change the subject. "You don't need an umbrella—it's just misting."

"Perhaps not." Flicking on the driveway light, Aunt Bets stepped briskly through the garage with Samuel Tail trotting beside her. For a moment, she stood poised with her chin thrust toward the foggy evening, reciting:

> Dark though the night that covers me,
> Black as the Pit, from pole to pole,
> I am the captain of my fate,
> I am the master of my soul.

Andrea fell into step with Aunt Bets. "Is that a poem by Samuel Tail what's-his-name?"

"No," said Aunt Bets, striding over a puddle on the sidewalk. "Watch that puddle, Sammy dear! No, I'm not sure just who wrote that poem, but isn't it inspiring? Of course, I may not have every single word right, but you can feel the *spirit* of it."

For a few minutes, they walked along in silence. Through the mist, the lighted windows of houses shone cozy yellow. Moisture dripped from the bare branches of the maple trees, and now and then a car swished past them on the street.

As they passed under a streetlight, Andrea marveled at how clearly she could see with her glasses on. Looking down on Samuel Tail's back, she could distinctly see droplets shining on his black fur. Of course the droplets were gathering on her glasses, too. She took them off,

slipped them under her jacket to wipe them on her sweatshirt, and put them on again.

Before Andrea got her glasses, she wasn't sure that she needed them. But now she could tell how much she had been missing. For instance, look at that car stopping at the curb a few houses ahead of them. Andrea took off her glasses to prove to herself what a difference they made. Without them, she couldn't even see the license plate. But with them, she could read the numbers and letters. And that girl climbing out of the car with a newspaper in her hand—Andrea could see, even without recognizing the green jacket, that it was . . .

Julie—oh, no.

Hurling the paper into the rhododendron bushes in front of the house, Julie turned back to the car. Then she caught sight of Andrea, and Aunt Bets in her astronaut raincoat, and Samuel Tail on his little leash. She paused, staring. "Hi, Andrea."

"Hi," muttered Andrea. "Aunt Bets, let's go back now."

But Aunt Bets stepped forward, holding out her hand. "Hello, dear! I'm Andrea's Aunt Bets. You must be a classmate of hers—a friend, I'm sure. Aren't you enterprising, delivering newspapers for your pocket money."

Julie looked surprised to be shaking Aunt Bets's hand, but she recovered quickly. "Is that your cat?"

"Yes, this is Samuel Tail." Aunt Bets beamed down at him. "I have to walk him on a leash because he's a city cat. To him, Rushfield is the forest primeval."

"Come *on*," said Andrea, trying to pry the leash out of Aunt Bets's hand. "I'll take Samuel Tail on the way *back*."

But Aunt Bets wasn't budging. "Just a minute, dear.

There's something I'd like to check with your friend." She smiled at Julie, who smiled her nicest rotten smile at Andrea. "What I'd like to know," Aunt Bets went on, "is your opinion about hairstyles among the younger set in Rushfield. Is it true, as Andrea says, that fifth-graders are too old to wear their hair in two tails? *I* think it's the perfect style for Andrea's heart-shaped face."

With a sinking stomach, Andrea saw Julie's eyes gleam. She could almost hear Julie laughing at her.

"I think so, too," said Julie pleasantly. Then her mother beeped the car horn, and she skipped away. "I've got to go. Nice to meet you!"

Aunt Bets waved after her. "Perhaps we *had* better start back. What did you say your chum's name was, dear?"

But Andrea couldn't speak. How *could* Aunt Bets humiliate her like that, in front of Julie, of all people? Besides, what gave Aunt Bets the right to tell Andrea how to wear her hair and when to wear her glasses? Look at *her!* Perfectly ridiculous, with her astronaut raincoat and her silver eye shadow. It was embarrassing to be seen with her! Andrea glared at her great-aunt, not caring about being polite. Aunt Bets was the one who needed improvement.

If Andrea hadn't been so angry, she would have been immediately alarmed when she felt herself shooting up like a beanstalk in fast motion, seeming to tower over Aunt Bets. Look at her, thought Andrea, with her silly fur-pillow cat on a leash. I wish she would at least stop treating Samuel Tail like a baby. Through her glasses,

Andrea stared down at Aunt Bets, a silver beetle on the sidewalk.

The towering sensation happened in such a quick swoop that just as Andrea was beginning to feel scared, she seemed to plunge back down to normal height. She gasped and staggered, as if she were in an elevator that had dropped too fast. What was going on?

Aunt Bets was her usual tall self, but she had let go of Samuel Tail's leash. "I feel a little . . . ixed mup." She pressed her purple fingertips to her forehead. "I shouldn't have worked the crossword puzzle without my greading lasses."

"Greading lasses?" repeated Andrea uneasily. "You mean reading glasses." She knew that old people sometimes got things confused, but Aunt Bets had never been like that. "Shouldn't we go home now?" She picked up Samuel Tail's leash.

"Yes," said Aunt Bets in a faraway voice. "Greading lasses—that's what I meant."

On the way home, Aunt Bets was silent. But glancing up at her great-aunt's face, Andrea saw her frowning, her mouth moving as if she was practicing talking. Andrea tried not to think about what she would do if Aunt Bets didn't snap out of it. Mother and Dad wouldn't be home from North Carolina until next week. It wasn't my fault, she imagined herself telling her parents. But at the back of her mind, a thought nagged: Maybe it was.

In the house, Aunt Bets headed straight for the sofa in the family room. "Andrea, be a lovey and put on the

kettle for a tup of kea. I'm going to take just the tiniest rest."

"You mean a *cup* of *tea*." Andrea bit her lip anxiously, unbuckling Samuel Tail's harness. "Do you want me to feed the cat, too?"

"Cup of tea, that's what I said." Aunt Bets lay back on the sofa. "I suppose you can feed that animal if you like, although he's overfed and pampered as it is."

As Andrea filled the kettle at the kitchen sink, she wondered why Aunt Bets had spoken that way about Samuel Tail. The cat wove himself around her ankles, mewing, as if he had heard who was going to feed him tonight.

The back door slammed, and Andrea's brother, Jim, appeared in his sweatsuit and jacket. "What's for dinner? I have to eat pretty soon, because—" He peered into the family room. "Are you all right, Aunt Bets?"

Aunt Bets smiled bravely from the sofa. "Nothing that a tup of kea won't fix. I'll start whipping up dinner soon."

Jim glanced from Aunt Bets to Andrea with an odd expression. Then he shook his head. "Can't wait—Skip's picking me up in a little while to go to the Celtics game. Never mind, I'll put some french fries in the oven for myself, and then grab a hot dog at the game."

In the kitchen, Andrea opened a can of Kitty Salmon as Jim strewed frozen french fries on a baking sheet. "A 'tup of kea'!" He snorted. "I sure am glad Aunt Bets is here to take care of us—or is it the other way around? I come home starving, and she can't even talk straight, let alone make dinner. What's the matter with her?"

"Sh. I— She just got a little mixed-up." Trying not to breathe in, Andrea set a saucer of the smelly cat food on the floor for Samuel Tail. "Pyew." She glanced up at Jim. "What are you staring at me for?"

Leaning against the counter, Jim was gazing at her with unusual interest. "Your glasses. I didn't really notice them before." A grin spread across his face. "They make you look like a spider."

3

Improving Jim

By the time Jim had wolfed down his french fries and gone upstairs to change, Aunt Bets seemed fine. Sailing around the kitchen, she cracked eggs and measured flour. "Three little girls from school are we," she warbled over the whir of the beater.

Relieved, Andrea climbed the two flights of stairs to her room at the top of the house. She wanted to think in peace and quiet for a while. If Aunt Bets was all right, Andrea could afford to let herself think about what had happened on the walk.

Catching sight of herself in the mirror over her dresser, Andrea frowned. She did *not* look like a spider! She still liked the way she looked in the dark frames, in spite of what everyone else seemed to think.

Andrea lay down across her bed, propping her chin on her hands. Gazing at the branches stretching in front

of the mist-blurred streetlight, she let herself remember the beanstalk feeling, and Aunt Bets looking so tiny. It was an experience out of the ordinary, thought Andrea. Someone else had used those words: Ms. Weirse, the long-necked woman with the large eyes.

Ms. Weirse had seemed to think Andrea was the kind of girl that exciting and wonderful things happened to. Squirming around, Andrea gazed at the wings hanging on the wall near the bookshelf. Their rainbow-colored feathers were faded. They had been so bright last year, when—

Andrea sighed, turning back toward the window. *That* adventure was over for good. Was some other kind of adventure waiting for her, as Ms. Weirse had hinted? Something to do with the glasses, with "making full *use*" of them, as the researcher had said? But how was she supposed to do that? And how was it connected with the beanstalk feeling?

Taking off the glasses, Andrea examined them carefully. She thought she could see a glowing point in the center of each lens. Or was it just the reflection of the lamp? She found five letters on the inside of the right earpiece: BIRPP.

Andrea giggled, remembering Aunt Bets's offended expression in Ms. Weirse's office. *"Burp?"* As Dad said, when they made Aunt Bets, they broke the mold. And she would never change.

Or would she? Another picture came to Andrea's mind: Aunt Bets's face as she spoke about Samuel Tail. "That animal," she had called him, curling her lip. And now

Andrea remembered something else Ms. Weirse had said. Something about "improvements" she could make with the glasses.

Maybe she was already in the middle of an adventure.

Maybe Andrea had changed Aunt Bets.

Andrea scrambled to her knees, her breath coming fast and short. Maybe she could improve people by looking at them in a certain way through the glasses. By changing their minds. That's how she had stopped Aunt Bets from acting silly about Samuel Tail—she had changed her mind about him.

For a moment, Andrea felt small and terrified, as if she had committed a crime, and the police would start hunting for her any minute.

Then she felt tall and powerful, the way she had felt looking down on Aunt Bets. Giddily she thought, I could do some great things with these glasses!

For instance, she could help Dad. What if Andrea could make him like exercising? "You slob," he was always saying to himself in the mirror, turning sideways to glare at his stomach. But he never felt like running, or going to the pool to swim. Andrea could change his mind about exercise!

This was as exciting an adventure as flying. In a way, it was even better, because Andrea wasn't just having fun for herself. That was a kid's adventure. Now that she was older, she could actually help other people.

Mother could use some help, too. She never could remember details—like buying enough milk to last over the weekend. Andrea and Jim would come downstairs

for breakfast Monday morning to find only seltzer water and salad dressing in the refrigerator. "I did it again," Mother would groan. No milk to drink, no milk to put on cereal, no milk for Mom and Dad's coffee—and the whole family's week was off to a grumpy start. Andrea could use the glasses to fix Mother's mind on keeping the refrigerator stocked.

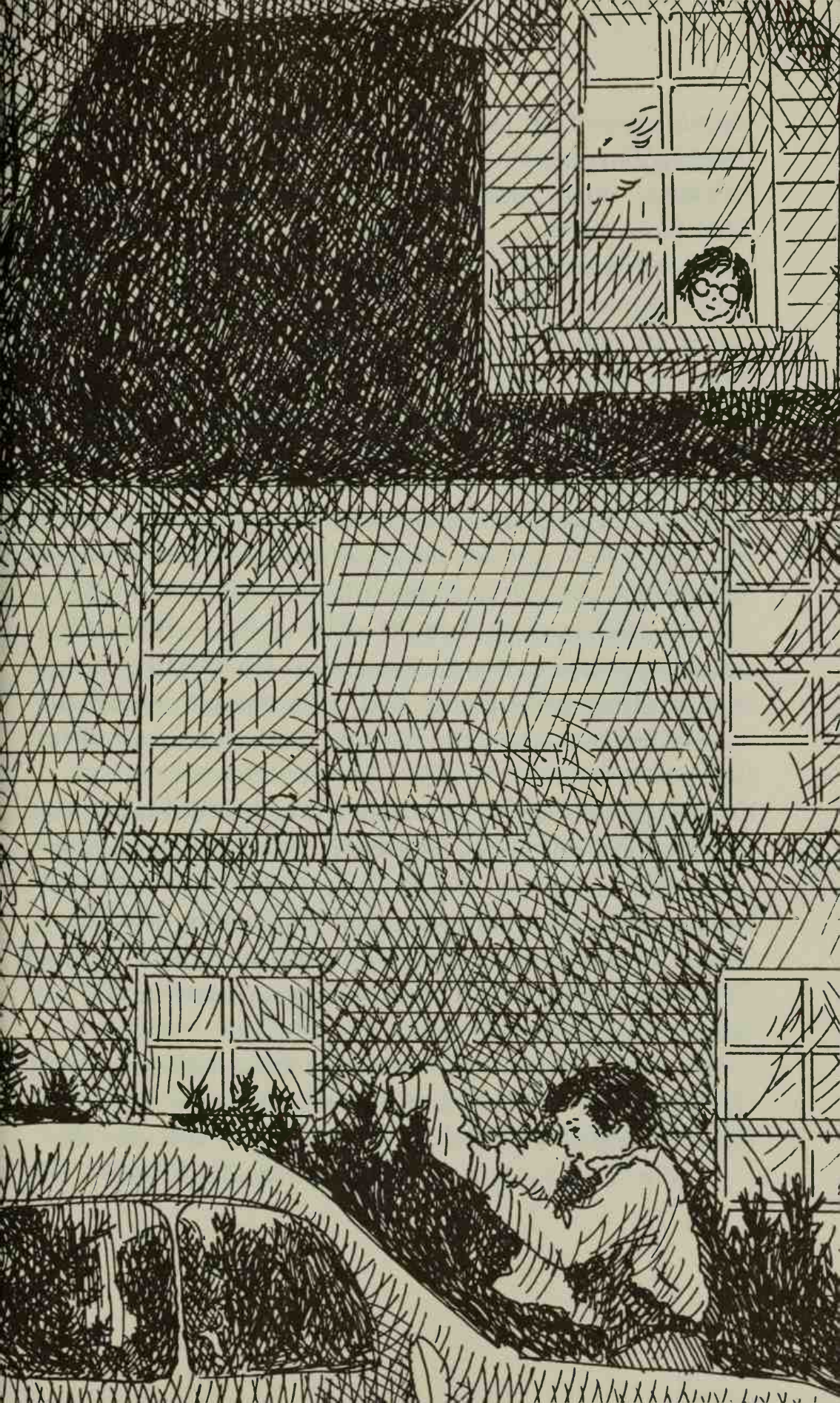
But the person in Andrea's family who really needed improvement was her brother, Jim. All he cared about was stuffing his face and playing basketball. He never thought about anyone else—never worried about hurting Andrea's feelings, for instance. "You look like a spider." Nice brother!

In the street below, a car pushed its headlight beams into the Reves' driveway and gave a beep.

Her breath catching in her throat, Andrea picked up her glasses from the pillow and slid them onto her face. Leaning over the windowsill, her forehead almost touching the glass, she looked down on the top of Jim's head as he came out of the garage. He was waving to Skip, shrugging on his jacket.

Andrea was frightened. Maybe she should wait and think it over. But then, reminding herself of the spider remark, she set her jaw and stared at Jim as hard as she could through the glasses. For starters, he could be nicer to her. Take her seriously. She watched him reach for the car door handle.

Then Andrea clutched the windowsill as her room seemed to rocket up into the mist, up, up as high as a skyscraper. Below, her brother paused with his hand



stretched out, a Jim-bug, tiny but clear, even to the *Rushfield* in cursive letters on the back of his jacket.

Down, down, down. Andrea's stomach lurched, but she held tight to the windowsill, watching Jim. He dropped into the car seat, saying something to Skip. Then Jim slapped the side of his head, laughing. And then the car door slammed, and the car backed out of the driveway.

Well? Had she changed Jim's mind, or not? She couldn't tell. If Jim changed his mind about Andrea, how would he act?

For one thing, he would be more fun. He would want to work jigsaw puzzles with Andrea, like the new one on her floor, a present from Aunt Bets. When he came home in the afternoon, he would want to hear about things that happened at Andrea's school. He wouldn't forget her birthday, as he almost had this summer, only Mother reminded him when she thought Andrea was out of earshot.

Trying to imagine Jim as this thoughtful buddy, Andrea shook her head. She didn't see how even glasses with special powers could change him so much. Anyway, maybe she had made the whole thing up. Maybe Aunt Bets had changed her own mind about Samuel Tail. After all, he *was* a fat, boring cat—maybe she had just realized that.

But then there was the eerie beanstalk-skyscraper feeling, when Andrea had stared at Aunt Bets and then Jim through the glasses. Andrea hadn't made *that* up.

Again Andrea took off the glasses and squinted at the

points of light glowing deep inside the lenses. She remembered the huge eye on the BIRPP building—"something almost ghastly about that eye," Aunt Bets had said. Andrea shivered.

Folding the glasses, she put them on her dresser and went downstairs.

After dinner, Aunt Bets sat in the armchair in the family room, painting fresh purple polish on her nails and talking over the sound of the TV. Andrea, curled up on the sofa, watched Samuel Tail try for the tenth time to jump into the lap of Aunt Bets's plush orchid-colored bathrobe.

"Shoo! Psst!" Aunt Bets hissed at the cat, nudging his chin with her elbow while carefully pointing her fingertips away from his fluffy coat. "A gentleman would take no for an answer. Why did I bring this pesky animal along?"

Andrea watched Samuel Tail back down from the chair once more, his plumy tail lowered and his ears folded. Then, as if he had remembered something important, he twisted around to lick his back.

Blowing on her fingertips, Aunt Bets touched one nail gingerly. "There, they're dry, thank goodness."

"Okay, Sammy," said Andrea. "You can get up now."

Aunt Bets laughed in an annoyed tone. "That's not what I meant, darling. I've had enough of that cat for one day. He only takes advantage if you encourage—oof!" Samuel Tail took a flying leap, landing with all his weight on Aunt Bets's stomach.

Andrea couldn't help giggling, but Aunt Bets looked grim. Rising and tucking the cat under her arm, she marched into the front hall.

"He can sit on my lap, Aunt Bets," called Andrea. What was her great-aunt getting so angry about? Sammy wasn't acting any different that he ever did.

"No, no," Aunt Bets called back. "He needs to be taught a lesson." Andrea heard the front door open. Then there was a high-pitched mew, and the sound of twigs cracking.

Feeling a pang of guilt, Andrea stood up. "Can't he stay in the kitchen, at least? It's cold out tonight."

But Aunt Bets waved her hand as if she didn't want to discuss it and settled back into her armchair. "Heavens to Hildegard, it's not all that cold. And he has fur galore. *I* wouldn't mind spending a night on the town, if someone would give me a fur coat. Isn't it just about your bedtime, dear? I'd love to let you stay up to watch the end of this program, but you need your beauty sleep."

Andrea stood where she was. Was it her fault? She had only wanted to change Aunt Bets a little, to stop her from being silly about Samuel Tail. But now . . . "I don't think you should treat Samuel Tail like that," Andrea said. "He didn't scratch the furniture, or knock over a lamp."

Aunt Bets shrugged, tightening the sash of her robe. "Mm. We all see things differently, don't we?" As if that ended the discussion, she went to the TV and turned up the volume.

Up in her bedroom, Andrea wondered whether she should sneak back down the stairs and let the cat in. But

Aunt Bets would certainly see her if she tried to open the front door. And if she went out the back door through the garage, the garage door would make too much noise.

Maybe if she looked out her window, she could see Samuel Tail in the yard. Pushing her glasses onto her face, Andrea crawled across her bed.

And froze in the middle of a gasp. On the other side of the window, inches from her nose, a wild splotchy face stared at her with blank eyes.

Then the wild face opened its mouth in a silent mew. Samuel Tail! Laughing, Andrea let out her breath. How had he gotten up to her window? Poor kitty, he must be desperate. She unlatched the window and pushed it up. "There. Come on, Sammy. Poor kitty, nice kitty."

Samuel Tail brushed past her shoulder, purring loudly.

"Here," said Andrea, "you can sleep on my afghan." She patted the knitted blanket at the foot of the bed. "See? Nice and warm." As she stroked the cat, he sat down on the afghan, still purring, and began to lick himself seriously. Soon there was a ring of twigs and fur knots around him.

"That's right," said Andrea. "Good night." Switching off the lamp beside her bed, she slid under the covers.

She was just starting to drift off when she felt something tickling her nose, and a tug at the covers around her chin. "Mmh," she said sleepily, turning over. She drifted again. But now it was her ear that was tickling, and something sharp needled her shoulder. "Hey!"

Sitting up, Andrea turned the lamp back on and frowned at the cat. He looked back at her calmly with his green eyes, pawing at the top of the sheet again, as

if he knew his rights. One of his rights must be sleeping under the covers with Aunt Bets.

"Look," Andrea told him, "it's not my fault. . . ."

But it was her fault.

Giving up on getting her to lift the covers for him, Samuel Tail pushed his nose under the sheet. With a quick burrowing motion, he wiggled alongside her leg, all the way down to where her feet propped up the covers. Andrea could feel him purring through her soles.

She turned off the light and snuggled down into bed again, taking care not to poke the cat. It wasn't very relaxing, trying to sleep and to mind how she moved her feet at the same time, but she supposed she owed it to Samuel Tail. Tomorrow she would straighten things out. . . . She would have a little talk with Aunt Bets. . . .

A bright light shone through her eyelids. "Andy," said a familiar voice. "Wake up."

Andrea jerked to a sitting position, blinking. "What? What?" Her voice was fuzzy with sleep.

"The Celtics game was fantastic!" Jim shoved a handful of something into his mouth, crunching. The smell of corn chips floated over to Andrea.

"But what's the matter?" Andrea yawned. "Why did you wake me up?"

"You should have seen this game," said Jim. "In the last quarter, with nineteen seconds to go, the Lakers are two points ahead. The Lakers shoot and miss, so Bird grabs the rebound and charges down the court, passes to Parish. Bingo! Parish dunks it. Plus the Lakers get a foul called on them, so Parish gets a free throw, and

sinks it. End of game." He offered a bag to Andrea. "Corn chips?"

Andrea stared groggily at her brother, wondering whether he had gone off his rocker. Then she gasped and sat up straighter, remembering the instant when she had stared down through her glasses at the Jim-bug on the driveway. "Jim," she said slowly, "did you feel anything funny or . . . or weird, just when you were getting into Skip's car?"

Jim stared back at her. Then he gave a snorting laugh. "Wake up, Andy. You're still dreaming. I was telling you about the Celtics game." But then, digging into the bag for another handful of corn chips, he spoke more thoughtfully. "The only thing weird was that I said a couple of things backward. Like when I got into the car, I thought I was saying, 'How're you doing, man?' But it came out, 'How're you mooing, Dan?' "

Andrea burst out laughing, but immediately choked it down at Jim's indignant look. It paid him back for calling her a spider, though.

"Then I said, 'Well, get's lo, anyway.' Skip thought I was fooling around. He said, 'I'm not going to get slow—we'll never make the game.' " Jim shook his head. "Weird. Like someone scrambled my brains—and then it went away. But I was telling you about the game. See, everyone expected the Celtics to win in the first place, so when the Lakers . . ."

Andrea sank back on her pillow. She had changed Jim's mind. Without a doubt, she had changed it! He wanted to tell her everything, as if she were his best friend. And after she had stared at him through the glasses, he had

mixed up his words for a few minutes, just like Aunt Bets.

She felt a twinge of worry. Would Jim's brains be all right, now? He was only a B− student as it was.

"I said, 'You know what "moving without the ball" is,' right?" Frowning at her, Jim sat down on the edge of her bed. But at a growl from under the covers, he jumped up again. "What's that?"

Andrea watched a lump working its way up the bed. "You sat on Samuel Tail." The cat's black-and-white inkblot face popped out next to Andrea, glaring around.

"That's not too bright, letting that cat sleep with you," said Jim. "Probably has fleas. Anyway, moving without the ball. Say this guy"—he pointed to a tuft on the bedspread—"has the ball, and this guy"—another tuft—"is guarding him. This other guy over here . . ."

Stroking the cat, Andrea tried to keep her eyes on the bedspread-tuft basketball players, but in spite of herself her eyelids sank closed.

4

Mr. Hinkle's Smile

Waking up the next morning to the clock radio muttering in her ear, Andrea wanted to turn over and go back to sleep. Maybe she was sick—she was tired, and there was a strange heavy feeling in her chest.

Then Andrea felt claws pricking through her nightgown, and opened her eyes to gaze into two half-closed green ones. "Samuel Tail. Who said you could sleep on top of me?"

The cat purred, kneading her nightgown. For a moment, Andrea studied his face: the glassy eyes with oval pupils, the black blot running down one side of his pink-tipped nose, the feathery hair curling out of his ears, the long white whiskers.

Pushing him off her chest, Andrea rolled out of bed and began to pull her clothes on. Samuel Tail certainly

could be a nuisance. Today she would have to work on changing her great-aunt's mind back a little, enough so that Aunt Bets would at least take care of the cat. Otherwise, Andrea would be stuck with him.

Pattering down the stairs after the cat, Andrea paused on the landing to yawn. The way Jim had gone on last night, as if Andrea were interested in basketball! He had told her the whole Celtics game, play by play, shaking her awake when she drifted off. It was wonderful that the glasses had worked, and that Jim was taking Andrea more seriously, but she would have to tactfully explain to him that she wasn't very interested in basketball.

In the kitchen, Aunt Bets was splitting English muffins and arranging them on the broiler rack. With the toe of one orchid-colored slipper, she pushed away Samuel Tail, mewing and rubbing against her ankles. "Good morning, Andrea. One English muffin or two, James?"

Jim looked up from the cereal he was spooning into his mouth. "Three. Please. Hey, Andy!" His expression brightened as he caught sight of his sister. "Listen, I had a great idea. You've got a lot to learn about basketball, and Skip and I and a couple of the other guys who'll be on the team are going to practice in the gym after school. You should come and watch us." Tipping up his cereal bowl, he drank the last of the milk.

"Watch you practice?" said Andrea in dismay. "I don't think those guys would like me hanging around." Any more than I would, she thought.

Aunt Bets set a plate of muffins and a jar of jelly on

the table, and sat down with her cup of tea. "Team sports build character, they say. And such a good way to let off steam."

Spreading a glop of pale jelly on a muffin, Jim bit off half of it. "They won't care," he told Andrea as he chewed. "The point is, you can learn a lot from watching practice. I'll explain to you who the guys are, and their strengths and weaknesses, and so on. So that by the time the season starts, after Thanksgiving, you'll pretty much know the Rushfield team, because we're going to be the core of it. Meanwhile, we'll watch pro games on TV together, and— Hey!" Jim broke off with a sudden scowl. Holding up his English muffin, he peered at the top of it. "Hey, what is this stuff, anyway?"

Aunt Bets smiled with satisfaction. "I wondered if you'd notice. I thought a little change from the same old grape jelly would be a treat."

Jim grabbed the jelly jar, staring at the hand-printed label. "*Prickly pear* jelly?"

"Yes." Aunt Bets sipped her tea. "Prickly pears are the fruit of a cactus, you know. A dear friend who lives in Arizona sends me some every Christmas, and I enjoy sharing it with other people."

"I bet you do." Jim felt his tongue as if he thought some cactus needles might have stuck in it. "That must be why you didn't eat it up right away after last Christmas."

Andrea giggled, but Aunt Bets smiled serenely. "If there's one thing I can do for you children, it's to help you develop a sense of adventure. Living in a suburb, like Rushfield, can be so dull—but we all have the chance

to make our own adventures in life. Even in our choice of jelly!"

Pushing the jellyless English muffin into his mouth, Jim gave Andrea a look. "I guess I'll pass on this adventure," he mumbled. "I'm gonna be late. See you at the gym, Andy." He crammed in one last muffin, shoved back his chair, and was gone.

Aunt Bets offered the English muffin plate to Andrea. "Have one with a dollop of jelly, dear. And would you like cereal, too?"

Andrea took a muffin, noticing that the half-eaten one on Aunt Bets's plate was buttered, but not spread with prickly pear jelly. "Thanks. I'll just—"

"Scat!" Glaring down at Samuel Tail, Aunt Bets shook the skirt of her robe to dislodge his claws. "Excuse me, Andrea. I didn't mean to interrupt, but that wretched animal dug his claws right in."

Andrea watched the cat circle beside Aunt Bets's chair, mewing up at her. "I think he just wants to eat."

Aunt Bets sniffed. "But does he *need* to eat? That's the question. That stray has been overindulged far too long."

Remembering her plan, Andrea wished that she had worn her glasses downstairs, so she could try changing Aunt Bets's mind there and then. Well, that would have to wait until after school. She got up from the table and opened a can of Sliced Liver 'n' Sauce for Samuel Tail. Why did cat food have to smell so terrible?

Aunt Bets didn't say anything more. But Andrea saw her looking at Samuel Tail, over the top of the morning paper, with narrowed, thoughtful eyes.

That afternoon, the kids in the fifth-grade chorus gathered in the lunchroom for practice. One corner of the lunchroom, with an upright piano and a set of risers, was used as a music room.

Andrea stood on the top row of the risers, watching the other kids jumping up and down the jiggling, creaking steps or talking in twos and threes. She was disappointed in the fifth-grade chorus. She liked to sing, and she had imagined that the chorus would be chosen from the best singers in the fifth grade—or at least from kids who really wanted to sing.

"Watch out, slime!" Scott charged toward her from the end of the row, leading four boys.

Andrea gave him a cold look, but she stepped down to the second riser. The train of boys thundered past, whooping as they leaped off the other end of the row. Those kids, for instance, weren't exactly what you would call serious singers. They just wanted to be in the chorus so they could fool around.

Folding her arms, Andrea stepped back up on the highest row. Mr. Bell, the music teacher, was late again. Any minute he would hurry in, out of breath, and plunge his fingers down on the piano keys in the loud chord that was supposed to make everyone pay attention.

Andrea gazed across the cafeteria, marveling that she could actually read the clock on the opposite wall. Before she got her glasses, she had hardly even noticed the clock.

Pushing the glasses up, Andrea rubbed the bridge of her nose. This was a good time, while they were waiting

for Mr. Bell, for her to plan how she could improve the kids at school. From now on, she decided, she was going to think things through very carefully before she used the glasses on anyone. When she changed Aunt Bets and Jim, they hadn't come out exactly the way she expected, probably because it happened so fast. Now she would take her time and do it right.

Andrea looked down at Scott, squirming along under the risers, trying to grab people's ankles. She would change him into the best-mannered kid in the fifth grade. Picturing Scott LeClerq bowing from the waist like an old-fashioned gentleman, Andrea snickered. She would have to be careful, though. If she made Scott too nice and polite, someone would beat him up. That was exactly the kind of mistake she had to watch out for. It was a big responsibility, changing other people.

Andrea's gaze fell on Julie Dodd, standing on the floor with one foot on the bottom row, telling something to Lauren and two other girls. Some kind of joke, from Julie's expression. Julie leaned forward to whisper something, and the other girls glanced up at Andrea.

Andrea knew it! That jerk, Julie, was telling them all the stupid things Aunt Bets had said last night—probably making them sound even more stupid than they really were. Andrea couldn't hear what Julie was saying, but with her glasses on, she could make out some of it by reading Julie's lips.

". . . weird-looking raincoat . . . on a leash! . . . heart-shaped face . . ." Julie framed her own face with her hands, simpering. Two of the girls bent over with the

giggles. Lauren glanced up at Andrea again, looking guilty and trying not to smile.

Andrea clenched her teeth. Julie needed improving even more than Scott. Yes, Julie would be first. Andrea would have to think about this hard, because it wouldn't be easy to improve Julie Dodd.

Turn her into a toad! Andrea smiled at the thought, feeling better.

"Hello, boys and girls!" A man was hurrying into the lunchroom, but it wasn't Mr. Bell. It was the principal, Mr. Hinkle, carrying a guitar by a strap around his neck.

Everyone looked at him in surprise.

Tucking in his chin in his usual way, the principal held up his hand for silence. He smiled around the group. "Mr. Bell couldn't come this afternoon—I'm sorry to say he felt sick after lunch, and—"

"No wonder," muttered Scott, "if he ate the school lunch." He made sick noises.

Several kids laughed. Andrea smiled, even if it was Scott's joke—the pizza hadn't been exactly tasty.

Mr. Hinkle frowned, strumming his guitar loudly for attention. "I'm sorry Mr. Bell is sick, but I'm glad to have a chance to take his place this afternoon. I know some good songs that I'd like to teach you, and I think we'll have a lot of fun." He smiled his kindly smile. "So jump up on the risers and in your usual places, quick like rabbits."

Andrea stepped down into her place on the second row, next to Lauren. Jumping with feet together and hands drooping in front of their chests like rabbit paws,

Scott and his pals hopped up the risers to the highest row. The whole structure shuddered.

Lauren leaned toward Andrea. "I wish those kids would fall off the risers and knock themselves out."

"No such luck." Andrea grinned, feeling much better. After all, Lauren hadn't really joined in with Julie, laughing at Andrea.

Mr. Hinkle picked out a few notes on his guitar. "Since it's almost Thanksgiving, let's learn some Thanksgiving songs." He strummed some chords. "The first song is about—well, why don't you guess? What do you always think of, when you think of Thanksgiving?"

A few kids in the front raised their hands, but before Mr. Hinkle could point to one of them, from the back row came a loud belch. There was a burst of giggles around the risers, and everyone turned to look at Scott.

Mr. Hinkle smiled tightly. "We think of a big turkey dinner, don't we? So this is a song about going to a Thanksgiving dinner. I'll sing it through once, and then you sing with me." He began strumming and singing, "Over the river and through the woods, to Grandmother's house we go."

"This is really dumb," whispered Julie, on the other side of Lauren.

Andrea felt sorry for Mr. Hinkle. Didn't he realize that fifth-graders were too old for this kind of stuff? Now he was motioning everyone to sing with him: "Over the river and through the woods . . ." The fifth-grade chorus joined in with a weak murmur, like a record player slowing down.

"Put some spirit into it!" urged Mr. Hinkle. "What kind of Christmas concert can you put on, if you don't open your mouths and sing out?"

Now Andrea felt irritated. *She* was already singing as loudly as she could.

"Okay." Mr. Hinkle held up his hand again. "You can do better than that—most of you can. *One* gal is already doing her part." He beamed straight at Andrea. "Come stand here in front and sing with me, Andrea. Let's show them how to do it."

Andrea didn't budge. She felt her face burning. She shook her head, whispering, "That's all right," but Mr. Hinkle didn't pay any attention. He just kept making motions for her to come down, smiling his kindly smile.

Slowly Andrea pushed herself through the lower row and stepped onto the carpet. Mr. Hinkle crinkled his eyes at her, raising his hand to strum the strings.

"So sweet," said Julie just loud enough for Andrea to hear. "The heart-shaped face on that gal."

Scott let out another belch. Mr. Hinkle began to sing, but everyone else was laughing too hard.

Andrea wasn't laughing, but she wasn't singing, either. Trembling, she glared at Mr. Hinkle. Didn't he understand *anything* about how kids felt? Stupid grown-up! *He* was the one who needed improvement, even more than Julie or Scott. Mr. Hinkle should be forced to see life from a kid's point of view, thought Andrea, staring at him through her glasses.

Oh, no—oh, no! Feeling as if she were rushing toward the ceiling in an express elevator, Andrea wished

she could take it back. She had meant to think things through so carefully, but she had done it again. And now she seemed to hover like a hawk above Mr. Hinkle, the silly little guitar-playing rabbit on the carpet. Panicked, she tried to think of a good change to make in him, before it was too late.

But already she seemed to shrink down again, feeling the queasy dropping-elevator sensation.

Mr. Hinkle was still singing. Shaking her head to clear it, Andrea hoped that maybe she hadn't changed Mr. Hinkle, after all. That was a close one. She could have ended up with another serious mistake.

Although the chorus still wasn't singing with the principal, they were paying better attention to him now. They stared at Mr. Hinkle, nudging each other and murmuring.

"Over the wiver and through the roods." The principal launched into the chorus again.

"Over the *wiver?*" Scott mimicked. Some of the kids giggled nervously. Others, including Lauren, looked worried. Andrea twisted her hands together. So she *had* done something to Mr. Hinkle. But what?

Abruptly Mr. Hinkle stopped singing and thumped his guitar like a drum. He was not smiling or beaming. "Quiet! This is a taste of wime. Go clack to your bassrooms!" Whirling, he strode out of the room without waiting to make sure they obeyed him.

"Clack, clack," said Scott, jumping off the top of the risers. "I guess everyone has to go to the bassroom!"

Not many kids laughed. Lauren joined Andrea, look-

ing dismayed. "Do you think Mr. Hinkle was kidding? What's the matter with him?"

"Maybe he ate school pizza, too," said Andrea with a nervous laugh. But it wasn't funny.

5

Andrea Regina

As Andrea came in the door, Aunt Bets was cutting the string around a bakery box. "What happened in school today, darling?"

That was a normal question, but Andrea didn't want to answer. All she could think of was what she had done to Mr. Hinkle. "Well—"

"Look, I stopped by the bakery and picked up some goodies for us. Let's have an elegant tea. Do you like tea, with lemon and sugar? It's just like hot lemonade, the very thing for a nippy day like today."

Andrea was tempted, although she didn't feel much like chatting with Aunt Bets. "Could I take mine up to my room? I was going to work on the jigsaw puzzle you brought me."

"Fine—I'll help you." Filling the teapot, Aunt Bets arranged cups and spoons and sugar and lemon on a tray.

"We shall take our tea in the tower room, then. Wouldn't it be lovely to have a maid in a white ruffled apron bringing the tea up to us? But I guess it wouldn't be much fun for the maid." Aunt Bets carried the tray out of the kitchen. "You bring the tarts, will you, dear?"

Puffing a little at the top of the last flight of stairs, Aunt Bets put the tea tray down on Andrea's dresser. "I haven't been up here since last year. What a charming room you have, and what a view—looking down on everything." She turned to gaze around the room. "And what is this—a feather stole?"

"Those are just the wings I used to—used to play with, last year."

"Oh, yes." Aunt Bets fingered the faded feathers. "They're very nicely made. Didn't you have a grand imagination! I'll bet you almost felt as if you were really flying. Of course, you've grown up such a lot since then."

"I guess so." Trying not to smile at the thought of how dense Aunt Bets had been last year, Andrea looked down. "Here's the puzzle, on the floor."

Aunt Bets lowered herself carefully. "Do you like this puzzle? When I saw it in the museum shop, I said to myself, I *must* get this one for Andrea." Holding her reading glasses to her face, she picked up the cover of the puzzle box. "Queen Elizabeth the first of England, in full regalia. That ruff! And look at the pearls sewn on her gown—hundreds of them."

Andrea took a tart from the tray. "I meant to ask you, Aunt Bets, about the title of the puzzle—'Elizabeth R.' I wondered what the *R.* stood for."

Aunt Bets looked pleased. "What an inquiring mind

you have. Would you pour the tea for us, dear? The *R* stands for *regina*—that's Latin, which all educated people spoke in those days. *Regina* means queen." With narrowed eyes, Aunt Bets examined the half-finished puzzle. "Let's see, this edge needs a piece with a streak of yellow on one knob. I believe that piece in your hand is the very one, dear."

Andrea had been about to try it in the other edge. "I think it goes over here, Aunt Bets."

With an indulgent laugh, Aunt Bets plucked the piece from Andrea's hand and pushed it into the line of edge pieces before her. "*There* we go!—Oh."

Andrea didn't say anything. She just picked up the mismatched puzzle piece and fitted it into the other edge.

Aunt Bets cleared her throat. "I'll work on the crown, shall I?" She began to sort through the pile of loose pieces.

Licking pastry crumbs from her fingers, Andrea was tempted to try changing Aunt Bets to be less bossy. But first she'd better make sure she could fix up any mistakes. How could she get Aunt Bets to like Samuel Tail again? Staring steadily at her great-aunt, trying not to blink, Andrea silently chanted a thought like a bumper-sticker motto: I (heart) Samuel Tail. I (heart) Samuel Tail. She braced herself for the rush upward.

"I'll have a tart now, dear." Aunt Bets stirred her tea. "Did you try this delicious sweet lemony brew?" Glancing up as she took the tart, she caught Andrea's stare. "Is something the matter? You know, darling, I've pretty much made up my mind about those glasses frames. They're not appropriate for a young girl, that's all." She brushed crumbs from the front of her silk blouse. "Now,"

she went on jokingly, pointing to the puzzle cover, "if you were Elizabeth Regina, they might be appropriate."

Andrea had to laugh at the idea of Queen Elizabeth wearing dark-framed glasses. But she wished there were some way to keep Aunt Bets from talking. She couldn't concentrate, and nothing was happening. She would have to give it up until later, when Aunt Bets was quieter. Maybe tonight, if she watched TV or read, she wouldn't notice Andrea staring at her. Sighing, Andrea began to gather the pale pieces of Elizabeth R.'s face, with her proud, unblinking eyes.

"*There* was a real queen." Aunt Bets turned a puzzle piece one way, then the other. "Here's the pearl on her forehead—that goes into what you have of the face, I believe. No, Queen Elizabeth didn't hesitate to order someone's head chopped off, if she thought it was necessary."

"Really?" Andrea shivered, looking at the queen's strong thin nose and severe mouth.

"Yes, indeed. But that's a rather ghastly, gruesome topic for teatime, isn't it? Tell me something amusing that happened at school today."

"Well . . ." Right away, Andrea remembered Mr. Hinkle garbling his words, and Scott laughing. That wasn't funny. Then there was Julie Dodd making fun of Andrea—that wasn't funny, either. Scott's belch in answer to Mr. Hinkle's question was funny, but Andrea didn't think Aunt Bets liked jokes about someone being impolite. "I don't know. It was kind of a boring day. Hey, Aunt Bets, isn't it time to take Samuel Tail for his walk?"

Aunt Bets, glancing out the window at the darkening sky, twitched her lips with annoyance. "Oh, we needn't bother with that pest just now. I'm enjoying our tea, aren't you?"

Andrea gazed from Aunt Bets to the picture of Elizabeth R. and back. A peculiar feeling was coming over her. There was something Aunt Bets wasn't saying. She realized that she hadn't noticed Samuel Tail in the kitchen, or in the family room, either, when she came home this afternoon. "Aunt Bets, where *is* the cat?"

Aunt Bets frowned into her teacup. "It's nothing you need to bother about, Andrea. I didn't want to upset you with this, but I was forced to place the creature somewhere else."

Andrea felt her heart sink. "Somewhere else? Where?" She jumped to her feet.

"Now, Andrea, it really was for the best. The Humane Society will find a home for him—or, if they can't—"

But Andrea was already out of the room, charging down the stairs. She knew what the Humane Society would do with a cat, if they couldn't find a home for it. Who, besides Aunt Bets, would want a fat, crazy-looking cat like Samuel Tail?

And if anything happened to him, it would be Andrea's fault. She ran faster, grabbing the railing to keep from falling down the last few steps.

"There you are." Jim was standing in the kitchen doorway, scowling down at her. "You forgot about basketball practice, didn't you? How do you think you're going to get to know the team if you don't—"

"Oh, Jim!" Andrea jumped up and down in front of

him. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry I forgot about your practice—I'll come tomorrow, I promise. But we have to go get Samuel Tail, right now."

"Samuel *Tail?*" Looking at her as if she had gone crazy, Jim took a jar of peanuts from the kitchen cupboard.

"Yes. He's at the Humane Society, and they might—" Andrea gulped. "We have to get him before anything happens. Please!"

With his mouth full, Jim asked, "So why doesn't *Aunt Bets* go get Aunt Bets's cat?" He sighed. "Oh, all right. I can't believe this, though. Mother and Dad ask Aunt Bets to stay here and take care of *us,* and it turns out she doesn't even take care of her own idiotic cat." He picked up his jacket from a chair. "All right, come on."

On the way to the Rushfield Humane Society, Jim munched peanuts and gave Andrea a lengthy rundown on how basketball practice had gone. She tried to listen, not because she was interested, but because she didn't want to think about whether Samuel Tail would still be there when they arrived. There was a sick, tight feeling in her throat and chest.

"It's on Heron Pond Road, right?" Jim slowed the car to let the headlights shine on the sign at the entrance to a narrow lane.

Andrea nodded. "I went there with Lauren when she got her kitten this summer."

Mrs. Sweetsall, a woman older than Mom with straight gray hair pushed behind her ears, opened the door for them. There was a chorus of mews from the back of the house and a scent something like the lion house at the zoo. "Yes?"

"Do you still have Samuel Tail?" Andrea had to clear her choked throat. "A big fluffy black-and-white cat?"

"A cat? Come in, please." Mrs. Sweetsall brightened, happy to see people who were looking for cats. "A black-and-white long-hair male?"

"Yes—he has a white bib and white paws, and a black splotch on his face." Andrea put her hand on one side of her nose to demonstrate. "Don't you remember him? Aunt Bets said she brought him here today." She twisted her hands together tightly.

Mrs. Sweetsall nodded, smiling. "Oh, yes. A handsome fellow, wasn't he?"

Wasn't he. Andrea's heart lurched. What did she mean?

"He's already been placed," the Humane Society woman went on. "Just about an hour ago, a young woman came around to choose a cat. It's heartwarming to see someone who wants a cat so much—I would say she actually *needs* a pet to care for. A very intense young woman. When I suggested she take a second cat to keep the black-and-white one company, she seemed delighted." There was a note of surprise in Mrs. Sweetsall's voice, as if not many people had liked that suggestion. "She chose a ginger tabby."

"Oh." Andrea tried to imagine this person who had wanted fat, boring Samuel Tail so badly, but her mind was blank. "Well."

"So the cat's all right," said Jim impatiently. "Thanks a lot, Mrs. Sweetsall. Come on, Andy."

But Mrs. Sweetsall put a hand on Andrea's shoulder, looking down at her kindly. "I'm so sorry I gave your

dear kitty away. Why don't you look at the other cats we have waiting for adoption? There's such a pretty half-grown Siamese, if you like that breed; or three litters of kittens: tortoiseshell, ginger, and tiger; or a nice gray female . . ." She began to steer Andrea down the hall.

"*Andy,*" growled Jim.

Ducking under Mrs. Sweetsall's arm, Andrea rushed toward the front door, which Jim was holding open. "Thanks!" she called over her shoulder.

On the ride home, Andrea felt a wonderful sense of relief about Samuel Tail. He was in a good home with someone who really wanted him, and Andrea wouldn't have to take care of him anymore.

But then she remembered Mr. Hinkle, and she felt her nerves tightening again. How would *he* change? She *thought* she had been thinking about how he didn't have any sense when it came to older kids. Maybe he would change so that he *did* understand them and treated them like real people. He would be a better principal than ever, thanks to Andrea's help. Probably she had nothing to worry about.

"Well?" Jim's stern voice interrupted her thoughts. "Who are they?"

Andrea looked at him blankly. "Who?"

"Pay attention, Andy. The Celtics! Name them."

Of course, Andrea didn't remember anyone except Larry Bird, which Jim said didn't count because everyone knew who The Bird was. After drilling her on the names of the rest of the players, he began to describe the Stonington team, Rushfield High School's arch rival.

"We got a lucky break last season when Martinelli sprained his wrist, because he was their best free-throw shooter. But this year . . ."

Andrea's thoughts drifted back to Mr. Hinkle. For some reason, she was reminded of a folk tale she had read, about a man and his wife who were given three wishes. Right away, the man wished for a sausage. His wife got mad at him for making a stupid wish like that, and wished the sausage was on the end of his nose.

Picturing Mr. Hinkle with a sausage on the end of his nose, Andrea giggled. Then she became aware that Jim was frowning at her.

"What's so funny about the idea of Rushfield beating Stonington?" he asked sharply. "There's nothing to laugh about."

6

Cool Hand Hinkle

Was that Mr. Hinkle?

Andrea paused on the hill above the school, looking down the drive that swung around the front of the building. Under the gray sky, a man stood at the top of the steps, holding a coffee cup, as Mr. Hinkle often did. He was wearing a dark blue coat and gray slacks, as Mr. Hinkle often did. But this man was slouching with one hip forward, and he wasn't wearing a tie. Her mouth dry, Andrea hurried down the hill. It must be Mr. Hinkle. She stopped again.

His hair. The man's hair was slicked back on the sides with some greasy stuff, and an oily forelock curled over his forehead.

Slowly Andrea stepped onto the sidewalk in front of the building. It struck her what the biggest difference was: Mr. Hinkle wasn't smiling his usual smile, with his

chin tucked in. In fact, he wasn't smiling at all. His lower jaw was pushed out in a sneer.

"Hi, Andy," It was Lauren at her shoulder. "Look! My mother took me shopping yesterday, and I got—look." She unzipped the top of her jacket to show a lemon-yellow sweater.

"That's nice," said Andrea. She fingered the neck of the sweater. "Fuzzy, too."

"It's angora. And it matches my skirt." Lauren pointed to a yellow stripe in her plaid skirt.

"Mm-hm." Andrea turned back toward the steps. "Listen, do you notice anything different about Mr. Hinkle?"

Lauren squinted at him thoughtfully. "He does look a little different. I wonder if he's still talking funny."

Andrea stood at the bottom of the steps, hesitating to go any nearer to Mr. Hinkle. As she stared at him, he caught her eye. Silently he mouthed the words, *Hi, slime!*

Oh, no—oh, no! Andrea glanced uneasily at Lauren, but her friend didn't seem to have noticed.

"Come on, Andy," said Lauren. "We're going to be late."

Just as they began to climb the steps, Scott brushed past Andrea. "Over the *wiver* and through the *roods,*" he sang out. To no one in particular, he added, "I just adore Thanksgiving—my favorite holiday." He belched.

"Scott's asking for another lecture," said Lauren.

Andrea hoped she was right. But Mr. Hinkle only looked at Scott with his eyes half-closed, sipping his coffee.

And then Scott sprawled forward through the front

door onto his hands and knees. "Aagh!" In an instant, he jumped up again, staring at the principal. His mouth opened and shut.

Mr. Hinkle smiled a sneering smile. "Did you have a nice *trip,* Scott?"

Andrea ran up the last few steps. Oh, no—oh, no! Mr. Hinkle had tripped Scott on purpose. The change was worse than she thought.

Scott was backing through the door, looking confused and afraid. Maybe it's all right, thought Andrea. After all, Scott sort of deserved that. She hurried past the principal, not wanting to look at him anymore.

"Eek!"

At Lauren's yelp, Andrea whirled around.

Lauren was clawing the back of her neck. "My new sweater!" she moaned.

Andrea's heart sank as she stared at Mr. Hinkle and the coffee cup in his hand.

"Dear me," said Mr. Hinkle in a jeering tone. He peered into his cup, pretending to wonder where the rest of the coffee had gone. "Did that get spilled down your back, Lauren?"

Lauren stared at him, her face white and her lower lip trembling. Andrea didn't know whether her friend would burst into tears, or rush at Mr. Hinkle and punch him in the stomach, or start screaming. Before Lauren could do any of those things, Andrea grabbed her arm and yanked her through the door.

"Ow! Let go! You're pulling my arm off."

Andrea held on tightly, towing Lauren down the hall. "I don't care. Couldn't you see you were heading for big

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trouble with Mr. Hinkle? He's in a bad mood today."

"A bad mood!" Lauren choked back a sob. "Did you see what he did? He just pulled back my jacket"—she put a finger at the back of her neck—"and poured his cold coffee in. On my new sweater!"

Andrea searched for something reasonable-sounding to say. "Maybe he's going through a phase." That was what Mother had said about Jim the other day, but how could a grown-up principal go through a phase? "Anyway, let's go in the girls' room. I'll help you clean up."

As Andrea rubbed Lauren's back with wet paper towels, she tried not to think about Mr. Hinkle. What if everyone found out she had changed their nice kindly principal into a grown-up Scott?

That wasn't what she had in mind at all, she was sure it wasn't, when she stared at Mr. Hinkle through the glasses yesterday. Just what *had* she been thinking?

Glancing at the stern-looking glasses in the mirror over the sinks, Andrea saw her mouth drop open. That moment yesterday afternoon came back to her as if it were happening now: She was standing in front of the fifth-grade chorus with Mr. Hinkle, her cheeks burning, staring at the principal. She was thinking, *He should be forced to see life from a kid's point of view.*

"Stop it." Lauren, twisting her neck to see her back in the mirror, sounded close to tears again. "You're just making it worse."

Andrea saw that Lauren was right. The brown splotch on the lemon yellow was still there. It was a little bit lighter, but it had spread around the edges where An-

drea rubbed it. The soft sweater was wet and matted. "I'm sorry. I tried."

Lauren pulled her jacket back on. "Now we're going to be late, too."

As they tried to slip quietly into the classroom, Mrs. Seberg glanced up from her attendance book. "Andrea and Lauren, the tardy bell has rung." She made two marks in the book, then looked at Lauren again. "Lauren, is something the matter?"

Lauren paused beside the teacher's desk, looking at Andrea as if she didn't know what to say. Andrea spoke up. "Something got spilled down her back. We had to clean it up."

But at the same time, Lauren burst out, in a louder voice, "Mr. Hinkle poured coffee down my back!"

Other boys and girls began to get up from their seats and gather around the teacher's desk. There was a buzz of comments and questions. "Yeah, he tripped me, too," said Scott, but no one paid any attention to him.

"Mr. Hinkle?" asked Julie disbelievingly. She tugged at Lauren's sleeve. "You mean, on purpose?"

"I'm sure it was an accident." Mrs. Seberg spoke firmly. "That's too bad, Lauren. We'll forget about the tardy marks this time."

"It wasn't an accident," muttered Lauren, but she turned toward her seat.

Mrs. Seberg, seeming not to hear, gazed sternly around the group. "I don't remember asking anyone to leave his or her seat."

Hanging up her jacket in the closet, Andrea noticed that Lauren had sat down with her jacket still on. Poor

Lauren. Her new yellow sweater was probably ruined.

"How many of you are buying lunch today?" Mrs. Seberg was asking the class. "Andrea, you may read the lunch choices from the menu."

Andrea sighed with relief. Things were getting back to normal. Now that she knew what the problem was with Mr. Hinkle, she could fix things up. Maybe during lunch she could make up some excuse to go to the principal's office. Then she would turn the glasses on him again and make some real improvements. She stopped between Scott's desk and the bulletin board, where the menu was pinned up, staring at nothing. Maybe she should forget about the improvements for now, and just turn Mr. Hinkle back to his regular self.

"Hello, space station?" Scott was snapping his fingers in front of her face. "Lunch choices, remember?"

Andrea scowled down at him. She was about to say something cutting when the intercom speaker crackled.

"Mrs. Seberg?" It was Mr. Hinkle's voice.

Andrea froze. Oh, no! What now? But wait—maybe it was all right. Mr. Hinkle's tone was polite and serious.

The teacher looked up at the speaker. "Yes, Mr. Hinkle?"

"Mrs. Seberg, is your classroom clock running?" He sounded concerned.

Mrs. Seberg glanced at the round electric clock above the bulletin board, then at her watch. "Why, yes, Mr. Hinkle. It's running right on time."

"Then you'd better go catch it!" Uproarious laughter sputtered from the speaker before the sound cut off.

There was a stunned silence in the classroom while a

flush spread over Mrs. Seberg's face. Then the teacher, her lips tight, strode toward the intercom button. She pressed it again and again, but the speaker was silent.

As the other kids began to talk excitedly, Andrea stood rooted to the spot, her fist pressed to her mouth. Things were not going to get back to normal. Mr. Hinkle was going to go right on acting like a big jerk. He would get into worse and worse trouble.

She couldn't wait until lunchtime to use the glasses on Mr. Hinkle again. This was an emergency. Andrea glanced at Mrs. Seberg, who was still punching the intercom button, her back to the class. Good. Andrea tiptoed swiftly across the classroom toward the door, pausing just long enough to whisper to Lauren, "I feel awfully sick." (That was no lie.) "Tell Mrs. Seberg I went to the nurse, okay?"

In the hall she began to sprint, her sneakers pounding on the thin carpet. Through an open classroom door, a teacher called "*Walk* in the halls!" but Andrea didn't even slow down.

As Andrea burst into the office, the school secretary was talking into the intercom mike, crumbling the doughnut on her desk into bits. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Seberg—Mr. Hinkle is—is in conference. May I have him call you back? . . . Well, I can't say what—" She glanced up at Andrea. "Excuse me, Mrs. Seberg. I have to take care of someone here." Looking relieved, she switched off the intercom and turned to Andrea. "May I—"

"I have to talk to Mr. Hinkle," gasped Andrea. She leaped toward the closed door of the principal's office.

"I'm afraid Mr. Hinkle is in—"

But Andrea was already plunging through the door.

Still breathing hard, Andrea shut the door behind her. "Hello, Mr. Hinkle," she panted.

Mr. Hinkle was lounging in his padded chair, his feet up on the desk. He was reading a *Conan the Barbarian* comic book—the same one, Andrea thought, that Mrs. Seberg had taken away from Scott last week. He shot Andrea an annoyed glance over the top of the comic book. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

Andrea didn't know what to say, now that she was here. "I'm sorry to bother you, but—" She felt embarrassed, just standing there and staring at the principal. He *was* the principal, even if he was acting like a bad kid.

But she *had* to stare at him through the glasses, in order to change him back to his normal self.

Andrea swallowed nervously. Come on, glasses. She tried to imagine Mr. Hinkle's nice old kindly smile.

Rolling up the comic book, Mr. Hinkle tapped it against the arm of his chair. "Take a picture," he said sarcastically. "It lasts longer."

Andrea cocked her head, trying to get a better angle on him. Any second, surely, she would feel that rocketing-toward-the-ceiling sensation.

With a creak of his swivel chair, Mr. Hinkle lifted his feet from the desk and leaned forward. "Can't you take a hint? Beat it, slime."

Andrea was staring so hard that her eyes burned, but the glasses just sat on her nose like regular glasses. She blinked hard. Maybe the best thing would be to tell him the truth. "Mr. Hinkle, don't get angry, all right? I'm trying to help you. You see, I did something I shouldn't

have done. I have this—this special power, and I accidentally changed you from a nice man, like Mr. Rogers on TV, to . . ." Andrea's voice trailed off. Mr. Hinkle had fallen back in his chair, guffawing.

"Special power, huh? You focused your special power on me? Haw, haw, haw!"

Andrea's cheeks were hot. It did sound ridiculous. But it didn't matter whether he believed her or not, if he would let her stay here to use the glasses on him. "So if you'd just sit still for a few minutes and let me"—she hesitated, not wanting to explain about the glasses—"just let me try to change you back, so you won't get into any more trouble . . . just do it for a favor?"

Mr. Hinkle stopped laughing, a polite, serious expression straightening his face. "Why, that seems reasonable enough, Andrea. But if you want me to do this favor for you, will you do one for me, first?"

"Sure," said Andrea eagerly. She hadn't expected to talk him into letting her stay so easily.

Jumping out of his chair with a look of secret amusement, Mr. Hinkle waved her out of his office. "You're so kind. I'll show you what needs to be done."

As Andrea followed him through the outer office and into the hall, the secretary called after him. "Mr. Hinkle, will you be gone long?"

"Hey, good idea, toots." He stuck his head back into the office, grinning. "Yeah, Cool Hand Hinkle's leaving for the day. I feel *sick*—know what I mean? Sick of this boring place!"

Oh, no. Andrea hurried down the hall, hoping he would follow before he said anything worse.

"Through the lunchroom," directed Mr. Hinkle, loping up behind her. His tone was normal again, and he nodded in a friendly way at the custodian, who was pulling lunch tables into place. "Here's my problem, Andrea. I've lost my driver's license, and I'm pretty sure I dropped it in a classroom yesterday. It must have been thrown away with the trash." He pushed open the door from the lunchroom to the parking lot, letting in a gust of cold air. "So the only way to find it is to go through all the trash bags in the Dumpster." He waved at the metal trash bin, as big as a playhouse, in the corner of the parking lot.

Hugging her arms against the icy breeze, Andrea walked over to the Dumpster. Half of the lid was folded back, showing a pile of dark green trash bags in the bin. "There's a lot of bags—about twenty." Would this take long? Maybe she could turn the glasses on Mr. Hinkle while he was searching the bags.

"Yes, at least twenty." Mr. Hinkle's expression was bland as he slicked back the sides of his hair. "I'd hate to have to search them by myself." Linking his fingers together, he held his hands near the side of the Dumpster, like a stirrup. "Here, you hop in like a rabbit and hand the bags out to me one by one."

Putting her right hand on the edge of the Dumpster and her left foot into Mr. Hinkle's hands, Andrea vaulted into the bin, on top of a trash bag. It split open.

"Yuck!" she exclaimed. "That must be a bag from the lunchroom. It smells. And I got mustard or something on—" Sensing something moving above her head, she ducked just in time, before the Dumpster lid clanged

down. Even while she was ducking, she knew how gullible, how dumb, how really stupid she had been.

"Haw, haw, haw!" There was a grating sound like a hasp fastening, and then a thump on the lid. "All cozy now? Watch out with that special power! You might get to be quite a menace."

7

The Captain of My Fate

For a moment, Andrea sprawled on the trash bags, the clang resounding in her ears. Then she realized that footsteps were fading away on the pavement outside. He was going to leave her here! She hammered on the side of the bin with her fists. "No! Wait, Mr. Hinkle! You'll be sorry if you—"

Andrea stopped hammering, rubbing her smarting hands on her pants. Mr. Hinkle wouldn't be sorry at all. He was gone—leaving for the day, he had told the secretary.

For the day! Andrea started to bounce around like a monkey in a cage, banging the lid and sides. "Help! Help! Help!"

Gasping for breath, Andrea realized she was yelling to an empty parking lot. And no one in the school build-

ing could hear her, with the windows all shut. She had to pull herself together.

Andrea sank down on the pile of trash bags, hoping she wasn't sitting right in the garbage from the broken bag. She had to think things over carefully, without panicking again.

She shivered. Pulling her sweater cuffs down over her hands, she made fists to tuck her fingers inside. Thank goodness she had worn a turtleneck jersey and a sweater and corduroy pants today. Folding her arms, she hunched over her knees for warmth.

Now that she was calmer, Andrea realized there was no reason to get so upset. Mr. Hinkle might be gone, but other people would come into the parking lot. Someone's mother, for instance. Mothers often came to the school to help a teacher or to put on a birthday party in a classroom

But just escaping from the trash bin was not going to solve her problems. Andrea sighed. She was in big trouble. Why, *why* had she thought it was all right to go ahead and improve people with the mysterious glasses?

As a matter of fact, the glasses hadn't improved anyone. Nobody had changed exactly the way Andrea wanted them to. There was *some* connection between what Andrea had wished and how they actually changed, but not a connection that helped. It was like working a long-division problem and getting 482 instead of what you were supposed to get, 824. Same digits, but Mrs. Seberg woud still put a red *X* beside the answer.

"I didn't know," Andrea pleaded to herself. She re-

membered something she had heard in a detective movie: Ignorance of the law is no excuse. She gulped. She deserved to be locked up—not just in a Dumpster, but in jail.

She had done terrible things, and she had thought of doing things that might have turned out much worse. What if she had wished Julie would be decent to her, and Julie started following Andrea around like a devoted puppy? What if Andrea had used the glasses on Mom, and she had spent the family's savings on tankers full of milk? Or on Dad, and he had done push-ups until he keeled over?

Groaning, Andrea sat up. At least she wasn't so cold anymore. The nest of trash bags seemed to keep the warmth in, the way the comforter on her bed did. Andrea imagined a comforter made of stitched-together trash bags, filled with smashed milk cartons and pencil shavings and orange peels and sandwich crusts and used tissues and uneaten pizza. Yuck!

Hearing the distant hum of a car, Andrea pushed herself up from the trash bags and peered out under the lid. In the thin slice of the outside world that she could see, a car glided down the drive toward the school. Andrea stiffened. Just as she thought! A mother. She would drive into the parking lot, get out of her car, and walk toward the lunchroom door. She would certainly hear Andrea calling for help.

The car slid past the entrance to the parking lot and out of sight. Watching with disbelief, Andrea bit her lip to stop her tears of disappointment. She had forgotten that mothers didn't usually use the parking lot. They

had to go to the office first, so they would park in the Visitors' Parking in front of the school. That mother would walk in the front door, nowhere near the Dumpster or Andrea's cries for help.

Andrea plopped back onto the trash bags, wrinkling her nose at the sour smell leaking out of them. Would she have to stay here until three o'clock, when the teachers started coming out to their cars?

If her parents knew she was spending the day shut in a Dumpster, they would feel terrible. Andrea's eyes smarted as she imagined the horror on their faces. They would jump on the first plane home. Mother would blame herself, because all this would never have happened if she hadn't asked Aunt Bets to take Andrea to the optician.

For some reason, the idea of her parents feeling terrible made Andrea feel better. It was nice to think of the fuss they would make over her, if they were here to let her out of the Dumpster. But then . . . Andrea could imagine all the questions they would ask. It would be worse than last year, when Jim had brought her home from New Jersey with her wings.

Of course, Andrea could pretend she didn't know what had happened, and then her parents and everyone else would blame Mr. Hinkle. But that would make her feel awful, so guilty that she couldn't stand it. It would be better if they knew the terrible things she had done.

Or would it? Andrea's thoughts went around and around, trying to figure out how she could stop people from blaming Mr. Hinkle without having them blame her. But she couldn't seem to get any new ideas. It was

as if the same tape were running in her head over and over again, getting nowhere, until she wanted to scream.

Andrea wished she knew what time it was. She could tell that time was going by, though, by watching the bar of light that fell on one wall from the crack under the Dumpster lid. Moving as slowly as the minute hand on a clock, the bar of light crept across the wall.

This was more boring than math, more boring than waiting in a doctor's office, more boring than the long drive from Rushfield to Aunt Bets's house. It was as if the outside world had faded away, leaving nothing but Andrea with her same old thoughts—and the garbage.

Finally Andrea's stomach growled, giving her something new to think about. Was it getting near lunchtime? Rising to sniff the air, she caught a whiff of fish sticks drifting across the parking lot. She imagined Lauren and Julie and Scott and all the other kids trooping down to the lunchroom, lining up for their trays of fish sticks and whipped potatoes and mixed vegetables. She swallowed, her mouth watering. It was Andrea's least favorite school lunch, but that didn't mean she wanted to go without.

Then a happy thought struck Andrea. The cafeteria workers would leave soon after lunch! She was sure to be rescued then—they must be parked in this lot. And even if that went wrong somehow, there was still the custodian. He would carry the trash bags from the lunchroom out to the Dumpster. He would open the Dumpster to throw the trash bags in—and Andrea would be free. So there was nothing to worry about.

For the first time since she got to school this morning,

Andrea relaxed. Maybe there *was* a solution to her problem, because the cafeteria workers or the custodian might not question her as closely as a teacher would. Maybe Andrea would have a chance to straighten things out before she had to confess how badly she had messed them up.

As soon as she could, Andrea would get to a phone and call Ms. Weirse. Why hadn't the researcher warned Andrea? She should have told Andrea exactly what the glasses would do. The least she could do, to make up for all this trouble, was to explain how to change Mr. Hinkle back.

It was much easier to wait, now that Andrea knew she would be rescued soon. There—that was the bell for lunch, ringing inside the building.

Leaning back on the trash bags, Andrea realized how tired she was. It had been a hard morning, and she hadn't slept well last night, either. Over and over, she had half-waked up with guilty dreams. Especially one about—what? Andrea couldn't quite remember now.

Her thoughts began to drift. She let her eyes close, and an image from her dreams seemed to float before her. Samuel Tail's face. Why would Samuel Tail be haunting her? He was safe in a good home, maybe curled up in someone's lap in front of a crackling fire. But then, why did he look so wild-eyed? On the dark screen of her mind, Samuel Tail opened his mouth in a silent mew.

Sleepily, Andrea wondered what was different about his face. There was something extra that wasn't quite clear . . . two glowing points . . .

Andrea woke up to a rustling sound. At first, she couldn't imagine where she was. Then it came back to her in a flash, and she jumped up so quickly that she hit her head on the lid. She had meant to listen for the lunchroom door opening, for the voices of the cafeteria workers. Instead, she had gone right to sleep. How long had she slept?

Pressing her face to the crack under the lid so that her glasses frames scraped the metal, Andrea saw lines of sleet blurring the landscape. There was nothing to show her what time it was, but it seemed very quiet around the school. She felt sure, with an awful sinking sureness, that the cafeteria workers had already left.

Andrea was about to burst into sobs when she remembered the custodian. He hadn't brought the trash bags out to the Dumpster yet, because of course she would have waked up if he had opened the lid. And she was sure he emptied the trash barrels in the lunchroom every day. Anxiously she stared through the crack at the lunchroom door. He would push it open with his shoulder any minute now.

Unless— Andrea gasped. *Unless Mr. Hinkle had told him not to.* Mr. Hinkle was even more devilish than Scott! That's what he had done, she felt sure of it. And he might even have made up some story to tell the secretary so that Mrs. Seberg and the nurse didn't wonder what had happened to Andrea.

Without meaning to, she started sobbing, salty tears trickling into her open mouth. She gripped the edge of the bin until her palms hurt. She was scared.

Hey, stop it! she told herself sternly. You can't go to pieces like this. Pulling a tissue from her jacket pocket, Andrea took off the glasses and wiped her eyes. In the dimness inside the Dumpster, a pinpoint of light glowed in the center of each lens.

She should have known better than to fool around with them. Well, she *hadn't* known better, and she *had* fooled around with them. Instead of brooding about that until three o'clock (Andrea wouldn't let herself think that it might be after three o'clock already), she should do something to cheer herself up.

Something inspiring, like saying a poem to herself. That's what Aunt Bets did. What was the poem she had recited the other night, when they took Samuel Tail for a walk? Andrea began to speak the words out loud, trying to pronounce them grandly, the way Aunt Bets had.

> Dark though the night that covers me,
> Black as the Pit, from pole to pole,
> I am the captain of my fate,
> I am the master of my soul.

Andrea gave a glum laugh. It was dark in here, all right, but she didn't exactly feel like the captain of her fate.

Andrea shivered. Crying had chilled her. On the other hand, thinking of Aunt Bets was comforting. Even if the teachers had already left, Aunt Bets would wonder why she hadn't come home after school. She'd come looking for Andrea—good grief, she'd have everyone in Rushfield looking for Andrea.

No, she wouldn't. Andrea's heart sank. Aunt Bets would think Andrea had gone to watch Jim's basketball practice.

Well, then Jim would wonder why she didn't show up at the high school gym.

No, he wouldn't. The cold seemed to soak right through Andrea. Jim would think she had forgotten and gone home, the way she had yesterday afternoon. She sat back on the plastic bags, stunned.

Andrea heard metal grating at the end of the bin, but for a moment she didn't understand what it meant. Then the lid creaked up, and sleet picked at Andrea's cheeks. Dizzy with relief, she pushed herself up, expecting to see the custodian's creased face.

But it was a woman, wearing a white lab coat under her rain poncho. She stretched her long neck over the bin. Beneath her choppy bangs, her eyes were wide and feverish.

"I was certain I sensed your aura," said Valerie Weirse.

8

Weirse and Worse

Climbing over the edge of the bin, Andrea couldn't believe her luck. "Thank you! I was afraid I might be stuck in there forever! How did you know I was in the trash? This is great—I was going to call you, anyway."

"I am not surprised." Still staring at Andrea, Ms. Weirse smiled slightly. "Even with my feeble powers, I sensed the psychic bond between us. They"—she nodded toward the school building—"tried to tell me you had gone home, but I knew better."

Stretching and stamping her feet to get the stiffness out of her legs, Andrea noticed a yellow bus rolling down the drive toward the school. And another, and another. Then it wasn't three o'clock yet. The teachers would have rescued her, if Ms. Weirse hadn't shown up. But Andrea was very glad, she realized, that Ms. Weirse had gotten here first.

"Could we go somewhere else to talk?" she asked anxiously. "The teachers are going to come out in a few minutes." Then, not sure that Ms. Weirse would think that was a good reason, she hugged herself and jumped up and down. "I'm freezing."

But the researcher cast an alarmed glance toward the school building, as if she didn't want the teachers to see them, either. "By all means, let us go. I will explain to you, on the way, how you can help me." Motioning for Andrea to follow, she hurried toward the far end of the parking lot.

Ms. Weirse halted beside a small, dented car with a rusting underbelly and pulled keys from her pocket. Andrea jiggled the handle on the other side of the car. "I think this door is locked."

"No," said Ms. Weirse calmly, "it's broken. Get in this side."

Climbing over the driver's seat, Andrea noticed that the door on her side was fastened to the frame of the seat with wire. As the researcher turned the ignition key, the car jerked, and the engine stuttered. Andrea wondered if the car would run at all, but with another jerk they began to slide backward. Hastily she fastened her seat belt.

As the car rattled out of the parking lot, the researcher turned her large, reddened eyes on Andrea. "Have you tried focusing your will through the glasses?"

Focusing her will. So that was what it was called. "Yes," said Andrea eagerly. "That's what I wanted to talk to

you about. You see, I accidentally focused on the principal, Mr. Hinkle, and—"

"Did it work?" interrupted Ms. Weirse. She drove through the intersection of Winter Street and Cross Street without slowing down.

"Yes," said Andrea. "I mean, no, it didn't work at all the way I meant it to. Mr. Hinkle turned into a person like Scott LeClerq, a boy in my class who's a big pain, and—"

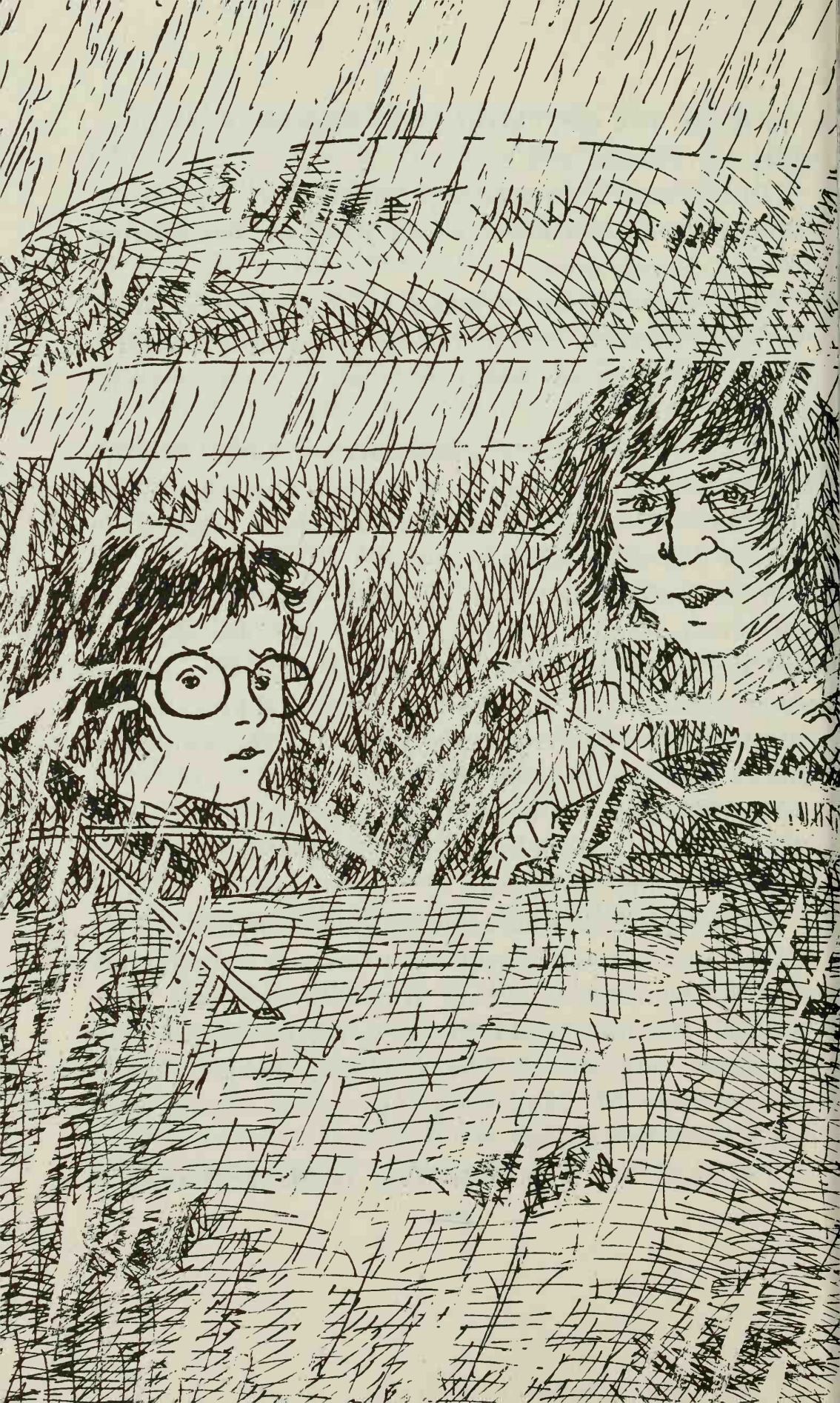
"They're working, the glasses are working!" Plainly, Ms. Weirse wasn't listening to Andrea anymore. Gripping the steering wheel, she stared straight ahead as if she saw a glorious vision.

What Andrea saw, down the road, was the corner of her street, Maple Avenue. Should she ask the researcher to stop, so Andrea could tell Aunt Bets where she was going? No, that wouldn't be a good idea. Better for Andrea not to have to explain why she wanted a private conversation with Ms. Weirse.

Valerie Weirse was murmuring to herself. "The cosmic currents must be with me. Finding her by her aura, the glasses working, and soon . . ."

Watching the sleet slide down the windshield, Andrea noticed that one windshield wiper was only scraping the glass loosely, moving out of sync with the other one. "Listen," she tried again, "I was going to call you this afternoon and find out how to change people back—*un*focus them? Mr. Hinkle is going to get in a lot of trouble, the way he's going."

"*Un*focus?" Ms. Weirse shook her head, her bloodshot



eyes still staring into the distance. "I have no interest in *lessening* psychic powers. My work is all in the direction of *magnifying* psychic talent. Do you understand how important that is?"

Andrea felt a cold draft from the floor whistling up her pants leg. Glancing to her right, she noticed again the wired-shut door. In a small voice, she asked, "You wanted me to help you with your work?"

"Yes. You see, if all goes well this afternoon, very soon every human being will be able to enjoy the special powers that have been selfishly wielded by a special few."

Oh, no. Andrea had gotten out of one fix and into another without even a breathing space. She remembered feeling lucky to be rescued from the Dumpster by Ms. Weirse instead of a teacher. If only the researcher had come ten minutes later!

"H-hey," said Andrea, trying to sound casual with her teeth chattering. "Hey, I'm still freezing. I left my jacket at school. C-can we go back and get it?"

"I am afraid not," said Ms. Weirse regretfully. "But I will turn on the heat for you." She shifted a lever on the dashboard. "I have an appointment at my laboratory—an appointment with destiny. And so do you."

Dusty warm air gusted in Andrea's face, making her sneeze. "Destiny?" They were driving through a stretch of pinewoods now, too fast for Andrea to jump out the window, even if she could somehow roll it down without Ms. Weirse noticing. If they came to a red light, maybe Andrea could manage it.

"You mean you're going to make glasses like mine for everyone? But—"

"*Better* than those glasses." In her excitement, Ms. Weirse stepped on the accelerator. The car, which had been putt-putting along, gave a cough and a bound. "Your glasses are just an intermediate step. I am working toward glasses so powerful that even a person without any detectable psychic ability can use them!"

In Andrea's mind flashed a picture of her classroom at school, with Mrs. Seberg and all the kids wearing dark-framed glasses, focusing on each other. Out on the streets, everyone in glasses, focusing on each other. All the mix-ups and mistakes that Andrea had made, multiplied by hundreds, thousands, millions. "No!" she gasped. "That's a terrible idea."

Reproachfully, Ms. Weirse turned her reddened eyes on Andrea. "That's all very well for you to say—you have already had an extraordinary experience that brought out your psychic talent. Your attitude is so selfish. So typical of those who are gifted!"

"It's not that," said Andrea doggedly. "It's—"

"My own mother and father had that attitude," Ms. Weirse went on bitterly. "You've heard of Clarence and Natalia Weirse, the clairvoyant husband-and-wife team? They used to appear on talk shows. In any case, when I was a little girl they used to drill me in psychic exercises. They made me try, over and over again, to levitate the table in my dollhouse. 'You're not trying, Valerie,' they would say. 'Just *think* the table up in the air.' "

"Your mother and father could make tables float in the air?" Andrea didn't know whether to believe her or not.

"Like balloons," said Ms. Weirse flatly. "But they did

very little of that kind of thing. They earned their living as clairvoyants—foretelling the future for their customers." Her voice cracked, and tears glistened in her large eyes. "Did they ever look into the future and foresee how miserable they would make their only child?"

Andrea couldn't help feeling sorry for her. At the same time, she was scanning a deserted fruit-and-vegetable stand as they chugged past, in case there might be someone around to hear cries for help. "They were mean to you?" she asked.

Blotting her eyes with the sleeve of her white coat, Ms. Weirse gave a long sigh. "They simply had no use for me, once they realized I hadn't inherited their special talents. I was a great disappointment to them. The only thing I learned, after years of struggle, was how to see a person's aura."

Andrea felt she should say something kind. "But maybe you could have done something else better than they could."

Ms. Weirse shook her head so hard that her choppy hair stood out to the sides. "Nothing else mattered to them—or to me. I was determined to make up for my lack of talent with education, so when I grew up I studied parapsychology in many countries, for many years. But *learning* about something is not the same thing as *doing* it, is it? My parents were not impressed with my advanced degrees, and neither was I. Until one day, I stumbled upon a hint in an ancient manuscript . . ."

"A hint about glasses?" asked Andrea in amazement.

"Not exactly, but it pointed in that direction. I saw the possibilities. Immediately I took all the money from my

savings, bought the building for the BIRPP laboratory, and plunged into my research. When you appeared the other day, I had just finished the first experimental glasses. I knew they weren't strong enough yet, but I had to find out if I was going in the right direction."

"But it's the *wrong* direction," said Andrea earnestly. "Believe me, Ms. Weirse. Just let me tell you what happened when I focused on my Aunt Bets."

"Later," said Valerie Weirse absently. "I don't have time now; I must explain to you your part in this cosmic drama. You see, after I spent all the money from my savings, I applied to the Psychic Research Foundation for a grant. This afternoon, Dr. Morospel, a member of the board of the foundation, is coming to the laboratory to review my research. I must get the grant, or I can't continue my work."

But that was exactly what ought to happen—Valerie Weirse *shouldn't* continue her work. Andrea tensed. What she had to do was pretend to go along with Ms. Weirse, but stay alert to any chance of spoiling her plans.

Her, Andrea, spoil Ms. Weirse's plans? Gulping, Andrea suddenly wished Jim were here. But she said brightly, "You'll probably get the grant, don't you think?"

"I will. I must!" Cords stood out in the researcher's long neck. "The glasses are a work of genius—he will have to recognize that. Not to give me the grant money would be a sin, a crime against humanity. He will have to see that!" Her voice sank to a trembling whisper. "But what if he doesn't?"

Andrea felt hopeful. Maybe this Dr. Morospel would

be a sensible person, a person who would realize how dangerous Ms. Weirse's plan was. "I wouldn't worry too much about that," she said reassuringly.

"No, you are right." Ms. Weirse gave a little laugh. "With your help, nothing can go wrong."

"With my help?"

"You will focus on him." Ms. Weirse regarded Andrea with her bloodshot eyes. "You will cause him to approve the grant."

"Me?" Glancing desperately out the window, Andrea saw the signpost for the town line flip past. "Er . . . I don't think I should use the glasses again. That's not a good idea. Really. They don't work the way you think they're going to."

Alarmed, Ms. Weirse jerked her head around toward Andrea. "What do you mean?"

They were nearing the BIRPP building. Andrea had only a few minutes to talk Valerie Weirse out of her scheme. "It's not that I don't want to help you," she said carefully. "But the glasses seem to get out of control every time I use them." She groped for a way to explain. "It's like the story about the man who got three wishes and ended up with the sausage stuck to his nose, you know?"

With a frown, Ms. Weirse studied Andrea's nose. "No," she said. "But there is no time to waste. Now, here is what I have deduced from my research: The most effective way to focus through the glasses is to concentrate on a simple slogan. This is what you are to repeat to yourself as you focus on Dr. Morospel: Big bucks for BIRPP. Repeat after me: Big bucks for BIRPP."

"But what I'm trying to tell you is, it might turn out to be a terrible mistake!" Andrea looked pleadingly at Ms. Weirse.

But the researcher stared straight ahead, clinging to the wheel as the car jolted over a pothole.

"Please listen," Andrea went on. "See, I thought I knew what I was doing with Mr. Hinkle, too. But he changed into a big jerk and shut me in the trash!"

Valerie Weirse smiled patiently at the windshield. "Nothing can go wrong. The glasses may have a tendency to magnify the user's will, but what harm could that be in this case?" Her voice trembled excitedly. "What if the foundation decided to grant me a hundred thousand dollars? Or a million?" She drew in a deep breath, ruffling her choppy hair with one hand. "Yes. It could happen."

The windshield wiper on Andrea's side made one last loose swipe over the glass and flew off into the gutter. Andrea wondered if the rest of the car would hold together long enough to get them to the laboratory. With the toe of her sneaker, she could feel a hole in the floor.

Actually, Andrea thought, it would be the best thing if the car did break down here. If a policeman came along to help, I could ask him to take me home.

But as the car rattled up over a hill, Andrea recognized the small shopping center on the left. On the right stood the squat BIRPP building, dark except for the huge eye.

Ms. Weirse stretched her neck to peer at the empty parking space in front of the building. "Very good. Dr.

Morospel has not arrived yet. We have just enough time." She swung the car off the road.

Pressing her nose to the window, Andrea squinted at the bright light beaming from the pupil of the big eye. If only she had time to think, she felt sure there was something she could do to stop Ms. Weirse.

But Valerie Weirse was already out of the car, holding her door open for Andrea. "Quickly. You must be inside the lab, ready to focus, when Dr. Morospel arrives. Now, do you remember what to repeat as you focus?" Pulling Andrea into the office, the researcher steered her toward the laboratory door.

Andrea pulled away. "Wait. I'm trying to tell you, the glasses are dangerous!" She felt hopeless—how could she convince Ms. Weirse? But as she paused, an idea struck her. "Okay. I'll use the glasses on that man to get you the money, but you have to promise me something first."

Ms. Weirse gazed down at Andrea, blinking her large eyes. "Oh? What?"

"Promise you'll be careful, when you make the glasses for everybody to use, that they're really safe—that people can't make bad mistakes with them like I did." Andrea looked earnestly at Ms. Weirse, wondering if she could trust her to keep a promise. "And promise that you won't do any more experiments with people like me wearing the glasses. It's not fair! Don't you understand? The glasses really botched things up for me!"

"Oh, I don't intend to use any more human subjects," said Ms. Weirse. "They can be difficult to control. I am continuing my research with animals."

"You mean guinea pigs?" asked Andrea. "Or mice?"

"No, no." Ms. Weirse frowned, as if that should be obvious. "Guinea pigs and mice have no psychic ability. I have to use animals with natural psychic potential."

Andrea felt a queasy tingling flowing over her. There was something she almost knew, something she didn't want to find out. "What kind of animals *are* you using, then?"

As the researcher opened her mouth to answer, a familiar high-pitched mew pierced the closed laboratory door. "Cats," said Valerie Weirse.

9

A Cat's Point of View

Like a sleepwalker, Andrea stepped to the laboratory door and pulled it open. She stood staring, speechless, at the counter on the other side of the room. Two cages. In one cage sat a striped ginger cat. In the other cage, wearing little glasses on his black-and-white inkblot face, crouched Samuel Tail. He opened his pink mouth in another mew.

"Sammy," whispered Andrea. She turned on Ms. Weirse. "Samuel Tail is a pet! You can't use him for experiments. Mrs. Sweetsall said you—she thought you wanted these cats for pets!"

"You know this cat?" asked Valerie Weirse politely. "He has a high level of psychic ability, even for a cat. But if he was your pet, what was he doing at the Humane Society?"

Andrea sputtered. "Because of the glasses, that's what!

It was your fault he was at Mrs. Sweetsall's in the first place."

But Ms. Weirse seemed to have lost interest in what Andrea was saying. "You can see how impossible it is for me to conduct proper research under these conditions." She pointed to the peeling countertop. "When I get the grant money from the Psychic Research Foundation, I will have this room completely remodeled. I need ten times the counter space, room for dozens of cages for the experimental animals." Ms. Weirse paced to the other end of the laboratory, full of machines and cabinets with many little drawers. "I need more storage for the lenses, better optical equipment." Pivoting, she gave the ginger tabby a stern look. "And you can imagine how much all those cases of cat food and those bags and bags of cat litter will cost."

Mewing again, Samuel Tail plucked the wires of his cage with his claws. He looked at Andrea as if he thought it was taking her much too long to let him out.

Andrea noticed him, but the only thing she could think about was how stupid she had been to try to bargain with Ms. Weirse. Valerie Weirse didn't care about anything except making the glasses with special powers. She didn't care about the trouble she had caused Andrea, or about whether the final version of the glasses would cause trouble for thousands more people. She certainly didn't care about the poor cats that would have to live in cages while Ms. Weirse finished her work.

"Let me go over the plan once more," Ms. Weirse was saying. "When Dr. Morospel arrives, I will answer the door. You will remain in the laboratory and pretend to

be my assistant. Then I will show Dr. Morospel into the laboratory, and immediately you will focus your will—my will—on him, projecting the thought: Big bucks for BIRPP."

Andrea cleared her throat. She knew what she had to do, but she also knew that Ms. Weirse wasn't going to like it. And Andrea was far from home and alone with Ms. Weirse. Still, there was Samuel Tail in the cage, his green-marble eyes pleading with her through the little glasses. "No," said Andrea. "I won't do it."

Ms. Weirse looked at her blankly. "What?"

"I won't focus on Dr. What's-his-name to make him give you the money." Andrea clutched the counter behind her for support "You think you know what you're doing with the glasses, but you don't."

"I *told* you what I am doing," said Ms. Weirse in a puzzled, angry tone. "I am struggling to bring the gift of psychic power to all people." Ms. Weirse's eyes narrowed suddenly. "You selfish girl. You are like my mother and father, like the rest of the privileged few who enjoy looking down on me." She held out a trembling hand. "I have no time to argue with you. Give me the glasses, then. I will focus on Dr. Morospel myself, as best I can with my limited talent. I must do all I can to ensure that I continue my work to its glorious fulfillment."

Andrea's heart thumped wildly in her chest. *Run,* a part of her shouted to her legs. But there was nowhere to run, because Ms. Weirse was standing squarely in front of the door. "Ms. Weirse," she squeaked, "you don't understand what it would really be like with everyone wearing those glasses. It wouldn't be glorious. It would

be—" Searching for the right word, Andrea remembered what Aunt Bets had said about the big eye. "It would be *ghastly*."

Ms. Weirse's face went pale, and the cords stood out in her neck. "Indeed, you must not use the glasses, you with your harmful negative attitude." She stepped forward, still holding out her hand. "Give the precious instrument to me."

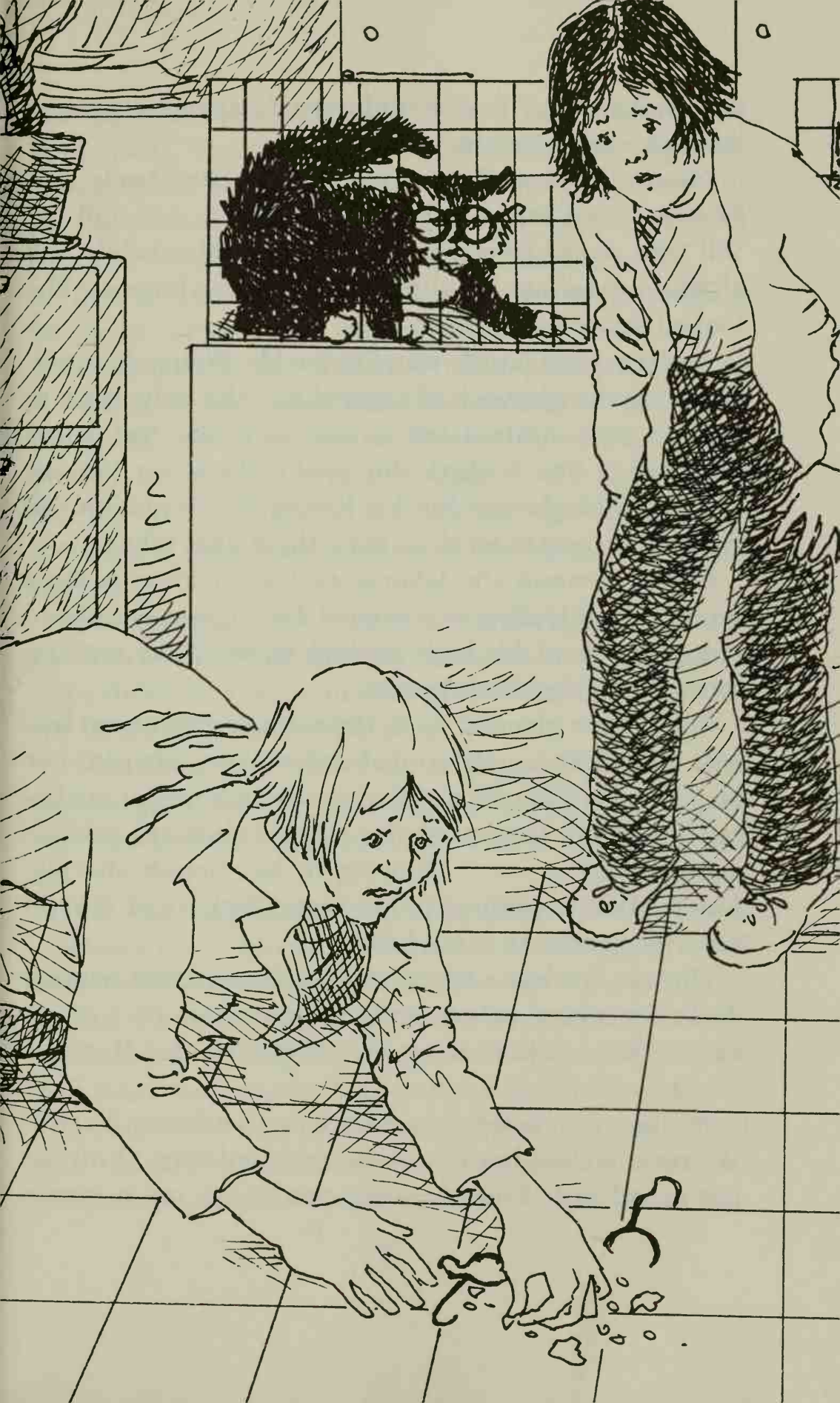
Thinking of Aunt Bets, with her strong chin jutting forward, gave Andrea courage. "Ghastly!" Pulling the glasses from her face, she dropped them on the floor and stamped on them. Sparks flashed as the lenses crunched under her sneakers.

"*Aaaa!*" Rearing back like a wounded giraffe, Ms. Weirse clutched at her scraggly hair with both hands.

Andrea jumped aside, shaking. What would Ms. Weirse do to her now?

But ignoring Andrea, Valerie Weirse dropped to her hands and knees. "Smashed! Destroyed! Oh, no, no, no." She crawled across the shabby linoleum floor, stretching her long neck here and there. Picking up each winking fragment of glass, she set it tenderly in the pocket of her lab coat. "All my years of working day and night, hardly sleeping." She groaned. "Could I melt the pieces together, re-form the focal point?"

Andrea stepped farther back, bits of glass gritting under her soles. Had she done the right thing, after all? She wished Ms. Weirse would stop moaning like that. Even with her blurry eyesight, Andrea could see a red smear on the researcher's hand—she must have cut her-



self on the glass. "You should use a dustpan," suggested Andrea in a quavering voice.

"Gone. Destroyed." Sitting back on her heels, Ms. Weirse stared into her pocket. Her voice was dull. "It will take weeks to recreate the glasses. Meanwhile, my chance for a grant has slipped through my fingers." She looked at her cut hand.

Andrea could hardly stand to see Ms. Weirse so upset. Breaking the glasses had seemed like the only thing to do, but now Andrea felt almost as if she had killed something. She wished she could cheer up the researcher. "Maybe the Psychic Research Foundation will give you money to work on something else. Like . . ."

Gazing around the laboratory for an idea, Andrea found herself looking into Samuel Tail's green eyes again. He gave one of his high-pitched mews. "Like reading cats' minds," finished Andrea.

Ms. Weirse glanced up at the cat, her expression listless. "My mother used to make mental contact with her Siamese cat. She told me the cat was laughing at me because I didn't have even the psychic ability to achieve rapport with a . . ." Drawing in her breath sharply, Valerie Weirse jumped to her feet. "With a cat! He still has the glasses! All is not lost."

Oh, no. Andrea's heart sank as she watched Samuel Tail raise a hind paw to scratch the strap in back of his ears. "Those little ones are special glasses, too? But how could a cat—"

Putting her hands on Andrea's shoulders, Valerie Weirse searched her face with reddened eyes. "You are not a bad girl. You are sorry you broke my precious

glasses, aren't you?" Before Andrea could answer, she rushed on. "You can still help me—and all the deprived people in the world who have to go through life without psychic ability. When Dr. Morospel arrives, you can still focus on him, in just the way I described before."

"But—" Andrea pulled back uncomfortably, nodding her head at the twisted glasses frames on the floor.

"Through the cat." Valerie Weirse spoke patiently, as if Andrea weren't much smarter than Samuel Tail. "The cat has the *ability* to focus on another mind through the glasses, but not the understanding. You will boost his intelligence through mental contact, giving him the thoughts to project and guiding him to focus on the right person."

"You mean . . . I could send my thoughts into Samuel Tail's mind?" In spite of the fix she was in, Andrea felt a thrill of excitement. She gazed from Ms. Weirse to the fluffy black-and-white cat.

"Mental contact with a cat is simple for those with psychic gifts." Valerie Weirse looked unhappy. "Anyone who could use the glasses could achieve rapport with a cat."

But Andrea gasped, forgetting about the cat. *Anyone who could use the glasses.* That was her, Andrea. She could have used the glasses one more time—on Valerie Weirse! If only she had thought of that before she broke them. Andrea had missed her chance to focus on Ms. Weirse and make her forget all about wanting psychic power.

The doorbell buzzed, and Ms. Weirse stiffened. "That must be Dr. Morospel. As I was saying, mental contact with a cat is simple. Concentrate on sliding into the ani-

mal's mind. And then direct his eyes toward the man, and think, Big bucks for BIRPP."

"Big bucks for BIRPP," murmured Andrea. As Ms. Weirse disappeared through the door to the office, Andrea moved to the counter. Quick, think: What should she do? She poked a finger through the wires of Samuel Tail's cage to scratch under his chin. Purring and tipping his chin up, the cat let his eyes almost close.

Should she do what Ms. Weirse wanted her to, after all? wondered Andrea. She felt so guilty about breaking the researcher's precious glasses. And she was so curious to find out what it would be like inside a cat's mind. What did he think about?

Then Andrea gasped once more, as the little glasses on the cat's face seemed to pop into sharp focus. Supposing she really could get inside Samuel Tail's mind, she didn't have to make him focus on Dr. Morospel. She could guide him to focus on Valerie Weirse instead!

Andrea felt unbearably excited, the way she did playing checkers with Aunt Bets, setting a trap and hoping her great-aunt wouldn't see it until it was too late. She took a deep breath to calm herself down. There were voices on the other side of the laboratory door—she had to "slide" into the cat's mind fast.

Shutting her eyes, Andrea tried to imagine her thoughts trickling down the back of her neck. To her surprise, she felt them, quite distinctly, sliding over her shoulder, around her elbow, through her wrist and into her fingers, like bits of ice through a long Flex-Straw.

At Andrea's fingertips, her thoughts seemed to stop, blocked. She tried to push them out, but they only buzzed

against the ends of her fingers. Very faintly, as if she were listening to a radio through a thick wall, she sensed someone else's thought. The thought was like a song, with music swelling into grander and grander chords, and words (although they weren't exactly words) like, *O glorious cats! Cosmic Cattitude at the center of all things!* The hymnlike thought faded in and out, as if it were on a faraway radio station.

Then Andrea heard the door to the laboratory click. She opened her eyes just enough to see out under her eyelashes.

"—that funding is very scarce this year," the man behind Valerie Weirse was saying in a dry, nasal tone. Dr. Morospel. He was small and slight, wearing a dark suit with a vest.

"This is my research assistant," said Ms. Weirse breathlessly. "She cares for the experimental animals."

Dr. Morospel looked askance at Andrea. "A little child, working with such sensitive subjects? I can't approve of that."

Andrea was silent, keeping her eyes down, but her cheeks were hot. Little child! You aren't so big, yourself. It would serve Dr. Morospel right, she thought, if she did focus on him after all.

"If I only had the money to hire a qualified assistant," said Ms. Weirse meaningfully.

Andrea pulled herself together. Ms. Weirse was the dangerous one, and this was Andrea's chance to focus on her. Imagining her thoughts draining into her fingertips again, Andrea felt them halt again at Samuel Tail's furry skull.

O catness magnificent, all-important cats! Cloudlike chords floating up, up. Andrea couldn't get through.

Peeping under her lashes again, Andrea saw Ms. Weirse craning her neck over Dr. Morospel's shoulder. Focus, she mouthed, pointing to him. Ms. Weirse was looking at Samuel Tail—she must think that Andrea was inside his mind by now.

As Dr. Morospel turned toward Ms. Weirse with his eyebrows raised, the researcher dropped her pointing finger and cleared her throat. "If you review my work thoroughly, I'm sure you will decide to fund it." She stared pointedly at Samuel Tail, who let his gaze sink to his shapely white forepaws.

Stepping over to the other cage, the Psychic Research Foundation man cocked his head at the ginger tabby cat and frowned. "Of course, it has long been recognized that cats have psychic ability, but— Just what is the focus of your research, Ms. Weirse?"

"*Focus*—that's it." Laughing nervously, Valerie Weirse leaned toward Samuel Tail's cage. "It would be a shameful injustice if my work were not funded," she told the cat.

Andrea choked back a giggle. It wasn't funny, after all; Andrea wasn't getting through to Samuel Tail, either. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on sending the cat a single idea: *Focus focus focus focus.* The thoughts seemed to shoot out of her fingertips, as if the end of a straw were suddenly unblocked.

"No, him!"

At the tone of alarm in Ms. Weirse's voice, Andrea opened her eyes a crack. Ms. Weirse was backing away

from Samuel Tail's cage, pointing frantically at Dr. Morospel. And Samuel Tail— Andrea's eyes flew wide open. The cat was crouched to spring, his feet shifting on the newspaper at the bottom of his cage and his plumy tail switching against the wires. Through his little glasses, his green eyes stared straight at Valerie Weirse, as if she were a white-coated mouse.

Samuel Tail was focusing on Ms. Weirse! But *what* was he focusing? Andrea hadn't given him any ideas yet. He had to understand how to change Ms. Weirse's mind, to make her believe it didn't matter whether she had psychic talent or not. But that was too complicated—how could Andrea think it in a simple slogan? Oh, help! Squeezing her eyes shut, Andrea pushed feeler thoughts down to her fingertips.

As if from far off, Dr. Morospel's voice droned. "You should understand, Ms. Weirse, that the foundation's policy is to fund only solid, sober-minded research. We want to steer clear of the crackpot image that the public often has of parapsychological inquiry."

Andrea's thoughts bumped to a stop against the cat's fuzzy head. She seemed to hear, as if she were standing in the doorway of a cat church: *O catness glorious, victorious, cats, cats, cats!*

10

Cosmic Catness

Worlwowrl! Staggering, Samuel Tail gave a long howl. Was he feeling that same queasy falling-elevator feeling that Andrea had gone through each time she focused on someone? He stared around the laboratory in an embarrassed way, and then he twisted his head to lick between his shoulder blades.

"Ms. Weirse, are you feeling ill?" Dr. Morospel sounded more annoyed than alarmed. Valerie Weirse was clutching his arm, almost pulling him over.

Andrea was annoyed with Ms. Weirse, too, and frightened. The researcher had given Andrea the impression that it would be so easy to make Samuel Tail focus her will on someone. What had Samuel Tail done to Ms. Weirse? Would she start mewing or trying to scratch behind her ear with her toes? Maybe Andrea should try to make the cat focus on Ms. Weirse again, and do it right.

Quickly, before it was too late! Or—would more focusing just make things worse?

As Andrea hesitated, Valerie Weirse let go of Dr. Morospel's arm. Leaning against the door frame, she pressed her hands against the sides of her head. "I'll be mine in a foment," she murmured.

Pushing back his cuff pointedly, Dr. Morospel frowned at his watch. "If you have nothing else to show me, I must be getting on to my next appointment."

But Ms. Weirse didn't seem to hear him. She was gaping at Samuel Tail in his cage. "Dutt have I won?" she gasped.

"You can hardly expect me to be impressed," said Dr. Morospel curtly. "You described your work as quite extensive and important, but yet you have a child as your assistant. And all I see here are two cats in cages."

"Exactly!" Ms. Weirse gave a groan. "Cats in cages! Cow hould I?" She shook her head, frowning. "I mean, how could I?" Hurrying to the counter, she unlatched Samuel Tail's cage. "O cosmic catness!"

Stroking Samuel Tail as he stepped out of the cage, Andrea giggled. Dr. Morospel looked at Ms. Weirse, his lips twitching in an uneasy smile. "We'll let you know our decision about the grant." He edged through the laboratory door.

Unlatching the cage with the ginger tabby, Valerie Weirse glanced over her shoulder. "Don't bother with that. I am going to completely rewrite my grant proposal." As Dr. Morospel paused in surprise, she went on. "Yes, I will even rename my research institute. Instead of BIRPP, it will be CRAC: Center for Research

with and Adoration of Cats. Magnificent cats!" She stepped back from the counter, gazing reverently from one cat to the other. "What an awesome privilege, what a responsibility to work with them! To study their whims and wishes!"

The Psychic Research Foundation man closed the door behind him, but Ms. Weirse went on. "For instance, do cats prefer sliced turkey or Jarlsberg cheese? That's the kind of question that needs to be studied." She smiled in a moony way at the tabby, who kept rubbing its jowl against her hand. "Oh, those elegant neat paws, those mystical eyes! How can I ever make it up to you?"

Andrea felt a grin spreading over her own face. Bending over the counter, she whispered in Samuel Tail's furry ear, "You did it, you did it!" To Ms. Weirse she remarked, "You know, that cat wants you to pick it up."

"Do I dare, o cat?" Hesitantly, Valerie Weirse slid her arm around the ginger tabby, who snuggled up to her, purring. She shot a respectful look at Andrea. "You have such a rapport with the Furry Ones."

"Mm," said Andrea absently. At the mention of turkey and cheese, her stomach had started to growl again. There was no clock in the laboratory, but it must be dinnertime. "Well. Could you please take me home now?"

Ms. Weirse raised her eyes from the tabby. "Leave Their Catnesses without anyone to tend to their needs? No, I couldn't do that."

Andrea opened her mouth to snap, "This is ridiculous." Then she shut it again. She should know by now that it didn't do any good to argue with someone who

had been focused on. "Can I use your telephone to call Aunt Bets, then?"

"It has been disconnected." Ms. Weirse looked regretfully at the wall telephone over the counter. "I was unable to pay the bill. I must begin work on my new grant proposal immediately."

"But—" Puffing out her breath with frustration, Andrea frowned down at Samuel Tail's flat little head. At first, she had thought it was very smart of him to turn Ms. Weirse into a cat worshipper, but now she wasn't so sure. Samuel Tail mewed, staring up at her and waving his feathery tail. Probably he was hungry, too.

"Would you consider joining the staff of CRAC as my assistant?" asked Ms. Weirse. "You seem to understand the Furry Ones so well."

Andrea was about to answer rudely, "Big deal," when she was struck by a brilliant idea. "Yes. Yes, I do. I can tell exactly what they're thinking. For instance, just now when Sammy mewed, he was saying, 'I want to go home!' He's awfully homesick."

"Oh!" Ms. Weirse looked stricken. "I had hoped—but whatever his Cosmic Catness wishes, must be." Gently she set the ginger tabby down on the counter. "May I have your permission to leave the room, er—"

"Elizabeth," said Andrea quickly. This was fun. "That cat's name is Elizabeth Regina. She wants to be by herself for a while, now. And she wants you to pick up some turkey at the deli on the way back."

With a humble expression, Ms. Weirse backed away from the counter. "Your slightest whim is my command,

Cat Elizabeth." She fished in her pocket for the car keys.

Picking up Samuel Tail, Andrea bent her head to hide a grin.

Andrea intended to hold Samuel Tail in her lap on the way home, and he seemed happy there until the car started. But as soon as the car rattled onto the road, he jumped to his feet. Giving a yowl, he climbed up to Andrea's shoulder, digging his claws in at each step.

"Ow!" said Andrea.

Valerie Weirse looked over with alarm. "He is displeased! I will turn the car around at once."

"No!" exclaimed Andrea. "That's—that's not what he means. It sounds like he's upset, but he's really just excited."

Wowrl! Now Samuel Tail was standing with his paws on the left rear window, staring at the lighted buildings flashing by.

"Maybe His Catness would like me to drive slower," suggested Ms. Weirse anxiously.

"No, no." Andrea forced a little laugh. The sound of that yowl set her teeth on edge. And she was beginning to remember how many other worries she had. Mr. Hinkle was still on the loose somewhere. Jim would give her no peace until she turned into a basketball nut like him. *And* Aunt Bets hated Samuel Tail, whom Andrea was bringing home to her.

Wowrl.

Andrea twisted around to see Samuel Tail peering out the rear window at the headlights of the car behind them. "Isn't this fun, Sammy?" She gave a yowl herself, smiling as if she thought he was in great high spirits. If Ms.

Weirse caught on to how the cat really felt, she wouldn't drive another block.

But before Andrea got home, she still had to find out what to do with the people she had focused on. "Listen, Ms. Weirse, you have to help me about the people I changed, when I was wearing the glasses. Isn't there some way to change their minds back?"

Wowrl. Now the cat was gaping out the right rear window. His green eyes bulged as if the car were zooming up to a hundred miles an hour. Actually, it was chugging along with the engine skipping a beat here and there.

"*Wowrl,*" yowled Ms. Weirse cheerfully, imitating Samuel Tail as Andrea had done. "The privilege of being near him, of hearing his mystical utterances!"

"As I was saying, there are three people I focused on with the glasses, and they're all going to cause a lot of trouble, especially Mr. Hinkle, if—"

"*Wowrlwowrlwowrl,*" warbled Ms. Weirse, beaming at the cat in the rearview mirror.

"Please listen!" pleaded Andrea. "You know the glasses that you made, the glorious glasses?"

Ms. Weirse gave a little laugh. "What a foolish obsession that was. The less said about them, the better. I have found my true calling in life, at last!" She gazed reverently at Samuel Tail as he leaped back into Andrea's lap. "But at least one good thing resulted from my misguided research."

"What was that?" Andrea winced as the cat's claws dug through her corduroy pants. Picking up his forepaws, she felt his paw pads sweating.

"His Catness's glasses, of course." Ms. Weirse looked

satisfied. "He will find them useful for hypnotizing mice and birds."

Samuel Tail focusing the glasses on birds! Gulping back a cry of horror, Andrea unbuckled the strap behind the cat's ears. "He doesn't want to wear them right now, though. The strap makes his ears itch." She slipped the little glasses into her pocket.

"You are nearing your home, O Cosmic One." Ms. Weirse made a right turn, and the car engine labored to climb the rise on Maple Avenue.

Andrea wondered if she had really been so smart to say that Samuel Tail wanted to go home. Now she would be stuck with him, since Aunt Bets couldn't stand the cat, and Andrea couldn't get any clues from Ms. Weirse about how to unfocus people. Samuel Tail, this fur-pillow pain-in-the-neck cat, would have to become Andrea's pet. She would have to feed him his smelly food and walk him on his silly leash and let him sleep on her bed.

"Which house is yours?" Ms. Weirse stretched her long neck to peer through Andrea's window. "There it is—I see the 19 on your mailbox." With a final rattle, the car pulled into the Reves' driveway.

"You know," said Andrea loudly, "I think maybe Samuel Tail has changed his mind."

Ms. Weirse's large eyes blinked at her in surprise. "What do you mean? His Catness has only to command." Opening her door, she stepped out of the car and waited for Andrea to slide across the seats.

"I mean he doesn't want to go home, after all." Andrea clutched the struggling cat as Samuel Tail tried to

claw his way to the open door. "He thinks he'd rather live with you." She tried to hitch herself to the door without letting go of the cat. Then, when Ms. Weirse got back in the car, she could toss him in and slam the car door.

But before Andrea's feet touched the driveway, Samuel Tail gave a final desperate twist, digging in his hind claws. Shooting out of her arms, he streaked into the garage. "I guess he does want to go home," said Andrea lamely.

"The ways of cats are mysterious." Ms. Weirse spoke respectfully, climbing back into the driver's seat. "I must get to the deli before it closes."

11

Unfocused

As the rattle of the researcher's rusty car died away, Andrea trudged into the garage after Samuel Tail. Both cars were there, which meant Jim and Aunt Bets were home. She started to open the kitchen door, then stooped to pick up Samuel Tail first. In spite of the way he had scratched her, she didn't want Aunt Bets to kick him. She pushed open the door with her shoulder.

"Andrea!" Dropping a colander full of lettuce into the sink, Aunt Bets rushed at her with outstretched arms. "Darling, so you went to find Samuel. But you should have told us—we were worried!" After hugging Andrea, she scooped the cat into her arms and kissed his pink nose. "Samuel Tail Ducharme, you naughty boy, to run off on your poor Aunty Bets!" She held him off a little, frowning. "But he's trembling all over. What has the poor sensitive fellow been through?"

For a moment, Andrea could only stare at Aunt Bets. Then she collected herself. "He's all right. He just didn't like riding in the car."

"He was in a *car,* without his carrier?" Aunt Bets threw Andrea a shocked glance. Stroking Samuel Tail's fluffy back, she kissed him on the nose again. "No wonder he's upset! You see, when he looks out the window and sees how fast the car is going, he gets terribly worked up."

"No kidding." Andrea rubbed her thighs, where Samuel Tail had dug his claws through the corduroy. She looked up at Jim, who was leaning against the refrigerator, scowling. "Hi, Jim."

He snorted. "I can't believe it. Twice in a row. When are you going to grow up?"

Andrea stared blankly at him. "Twice in a row what?"

" 'Twice in a row what?' " He mimicked her in a silly high voice. "What an airhead. You beg and beg me to let you come watch basketball practice. It's a pain, but Mother and Dad told me to be nice to you while they're gone, so finally I say you can come. And what do you do? You totally forget."

"But you—" Andrea sputtered.

"Same thing again today," Jim went on. " 'Oh, please, Jim, please let me watch you practice.' Then you go off chasing that stupid cat." His voice sank to a growl. "I didn't know whether you were hit by a truck, or what." Grabbing an apple from the basket on the table, he took a huge bite, glowering at her. "Just forget about basketball, will you?"

Stupefied, Andrea gaped at him. Then she smiled sweetly. "Okay, Jim. I'm really sorry." Taking a deep

breath, Andrea felt suddenly light. Somehow, Aunt Bets and Jim were their old selves again, just the way they had been before she focused on them through the glasses. She gazed happily from Aunt Bets murmuring into Samuel Tail's ear to Jim chomping chunks out of his apple. Their old, irritating, unimproved selves. The whole kitchen looked blurry but beautiful to her, full of warm light.

Then a thought struck her. "The glasses!"

"Glasses?" Aunt Bets raised her eyebrows over the top of the cat's head. "Your glasses? Why aren't you wearing them, Andrea dear?" She nodded wisely. "I suspected you wouldn't care for those harsh dark frames very long."

"They're broken," said Andrea, and added to herself, "That must be what happened. That must have done it. Then—" A hope swelled inside her. If Aunt Bets and Jim were back to normal, Mr. Hinkle would be, too—wouldn't he?

Jim shook his head at her. "Man, you can't even keep your glasses on your nose."

"Perhaps you need a ribbon, like mine." Aunt Bets touched the black ribbon from which her reading glasses hung. "You *have* been forgetful, lately. You left your jacket at school, you know—your principal was kind enough to bring it by."

"Mr. Hinkle brought my jacket from school?" asked Andrea eagerly. The Scott-like Mr. Hinkle would never have done that.

"Yes, such a pleasant young man. He seemed to blame himself somehow—he was so concerned that you might be chilly without your jacket."

"Anyway," said Jim, tossing his apple core into the sink, "are we going to eat, *finally?*"

Andrea sniffed. "Something smells good." It seemed like long, long ago—several days, at least—that she had eaten breakfast. "Something in the oven."

"Shepherd's pie," said Aunt Bets, "and a crispy green salad."

"Dinner was ready half an hour ago." Jim looked accusingly at Andrea.

"Yes, if you'll just set the table, Andrea dear . . ." Holding Samuel Tail up, Aunt Bets studied his black-and-white inkblot face. "Sammy sweetums, I am so relieved to see you again! You must tell me all about your adventures." She smiled at Andrea. "Don't you wish he could talk? I wonder what he'd say."

Laying the forks and knives around the kitchen table, Andrea paused. She was tempted to tell Aunt Bets about cosmic cattitude. But then Samuel Tail mewed in Aunt Bets's face, and Andrea grinned. She was sure she knew what was on Sammy's mind, even without mental contact. "That's easy. He'd say, 'Gimme Kitty Salmon!' "

Aunt Bets trilled a laugh. "What a good imagination you have, darling! Of course, I like to think Samuel Tail would address me more politely. But he *shall* have his dinner, right away." She set the cat on the floor. "You may serve him his Kitty Salmon, Andrea, while I take up our dinner."

As Andrea turned the can opener, she held her breath, trying not to breathe in Kitty Salmon fumes, but she didn't mind feeding Samuel Tail now. He was still Aunt Bets's cat, thank goodness.

Gently Andrea patted her pocket to feel the little glasses. They must never be used again, but never be broken, either. She would keep them in a safe place in her room—maybe on the shelf near her wings.

Slipping on mitts, Aunt Bets pulled the fragrant brown-crusted shepherd's pie from the oven. "At a time like this, the words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow come to mind: 'And the cares, that infest the day, / Shall fold their tents, like the Arabs, / And as silently steal away.' "

"At a time like this," said Jim, "the words of James Philip Reve come to mind: 'Let's eat.' "

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The huge eye stared at them through the rainy dusk.

Was this the right optician? Aunt Bets is convinced that it is, but Andrea thinks it's all pretty strange. The sign on the door says BIRPP—Borderline Institute for Research into Psychic Phenomena, explains Valerie Weirse, the white-coated woman inside. Andrea *does* get a pair of glasses there, although she's not sure what Valerie Weirse means about "the improvements that are possible with them."

But Andrea soon finds out. When s
uses the glasses' magical powe
strange problems pop up at home a
school. In the end, she has to deci
how to foil Ms. Weirse's terrible pla
for the Ghastly Glasses.